The Valiant

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

THE VALIANT

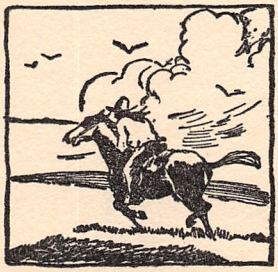
BOOKS BY

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

A DAUGHTER OF THE DONS
A MAN FOUR-SQUARE
BONANZA
BUCKY O'CONNOR
CROOKED TRAILS AND STRAIGHT
COLORADO
FAMOUS SHERIFFS AND WESTERN OUTLAWS
GUNSIGHT PASS
IRONHEART
JUDGE COLT
MAN-SIZE
OH, YOU TEX!
RIDGWAY OF MONTANA
ROADS OF DOUBT
STEVE YEAGER
TANGLED-TRAILS
TEXAS MAN
THE BIG-TOWN ROUND-UP
THE BRAND BLOTTERS
A DAUGHTER OF RAASAY
THE DESERT'S PRICE
THE FIGHTING EDGE
THE FIGHTING TENDERFOOT
THE HIGHGRADER
THE MAVERICKS
THE PIRATE OF PANAMA
THE SHERIFF'S SON
A TEXAS RANGER
THE VALIANT
THE VISION SPLENDID
THE YUKON TRAIL
TROUBLED WATERS
WYOMING

THE VALIANT

BY WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE



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THE VALIANT

CHAPTER I

Enter Jasper Cole

AT ONE o'clock, when the three cowboys bow-legged into the Cattlemen's Bank, there had been no other sign of life on Main and Custer streets. Under a friendly summer sun Bonanza lay, peaceful as old age, in drowsy siesta.

At seven minutes past one, when Jasper Cole stood over the dead bodies of two of the cowboys, a thin trickle of smoke emerging from the barrel of his .44, every building was disgorging occupants. Men and women poured out, crowding one another like seeds squirted from an orange. They converged toward the common center, the scene dominated by the slender, erect man with the stabbing eyes.

"Not too close." Cole gave curt orders. "Keep back till the coroner has seen these fellows. You, Manderson, get this gold back into the safe. . . . Don't crowd."

The two sacks of gold lay within three feet of each other, just where they had been dropped by the bandits when they fell. The cashier, his lips bloodless from the shock of this experience, picked up one and handed it to

the teller. He had to lift the outstretched arm of the shorter cowboy to recover the second.

"Count it. Make sure it's all there," snapped Cole.

"Right away, Sheriff. Soon as I get it inside," the cashier nodded. "I'll close the bank for to-day."

The gaze of the sheriff, sweeping the circle of eager eyes, met those of a girl. She was staring at him in horror, her big brown eyes dilated in a white face of fear. For she had run out of the bank in time to see a deed appallingly ruthless. The bodies of the two men had been lying in the dust. One was motionless, an arm of the other moved feebly. Into that prostrate figure, from which life had almost ebbed, the sheriff had flung two bullets. The shock of it had made the girl limp.

Now Cole for the first time recognized her. He spoke in a hoarse voice not familiar to her.

"Go home, girl, and stay there."

Without a word, limbs trembling, the girl turned and walked up the street. She was Marigold Cole, the daughter of the sheriff.

Men jostled each other to get a better view of the bodies. "What is it?" . . . "How'd it happen?" . . . "Who did it?" they asked one another.

"Here comes Dr. Hayes," someone called in an excited voice.

The coroner was a sandy-haired little man with a red mustache. He had with him his medical case. He made

a swift preliminary examination of the two bodies lying in the dust.

"Both dead," he pronounced. His bristly eyebrows lifted inquiringly to the sheriff. "Who did it?"

"I did," Cole said quietly. "From the window of the Silver Palace with a double-barreled shotgun."

"Loaded with buckshot," the coroner added. "Quick work. You knew they were robbing the bank, then?"

"Saw them come out with the sacks and with guns in their hands. I'd been waiting for them."

"Waiting? You saw what they were up to?"

"Guessed it, but wasn't sure. Saw them ride into town. I walked through Farrell's store to size them up. They fooled around for an hour before they got busy. For two weeks I've had a description of the men who robbed the Cloverdale bank. Thought it likely they might pay us a visit."

"He's got the world beat," commented with enthusiasm a plump, red-faced saloon keeper. "Hats off to Jas Cole, by jingo. He sure wound up these two fellows' ball of yarn for them."

A woman spoke to the coroner, gently, in a contralto voice rich with a low throaty cadence, "If you've finished your examination, Dr. Hayes, hadn't we better carry the poor fellows into the Silver Palace?"

The coroner looked into her luminous violet eyes. She had not been there a moment before. The crowd had opened to let her in.

"I think so, Mrs. Gregg," he agreed.

She was a woman men saw once and dreamed about for many waking hours. It was not only that she was lovely. Her beauty was illumined by some quality that fascinated and disturbed. Into the fine-textured skin, soft as satin, colorless as milk, there flowed, under such emotion as moved her now, a tint pure as the flush of dawn. Looking into her eyes men sensed within her a banked fire of passion that made her seem provocatively alive. Her street dress had the simplicity that goes with a combination of expense and perfect taste. As she walked beside the men who carried the bodies across the street, her slender limbs moved rhythmically.

"On this billiard table," she said, and smoothed the sheet that covered it to protect it from dust.

All of those present had seen Janice Gregg in this room before. She was often at Jasper Cole's Silver Palace, bucking the games recklessly, dancing, playing the piano. She might be a flame of gayety, or she might be quiet and self-contained. They did not understand her. She was surrounded by some aura of mystery. Was she trying to crowd out of her heart by excitement whatever passion of regret there might be for the world she had flung away? Who could tell?

They saw her now with a wisp of scented handkerchief brushing tenderly the dust from a face that would never again be quick with life. She was wholly herself,

unconscious of the steady regard of many eyes, her face a reflex of the sympathy that flowed within.

Looking at her, Jasper Cole's face showed disapproval. He wished that Janice would learn to keep her emotions within bounds. She was, he would like to believe, his particular friend, and this display of sentiment might easily be construed as criticism of what he had done.

"Give me your handkerchief," she said to him.

Cole stepped forward, drawing out his handkerchief as he did so. She took it from him and spread it over the face of one of the outlaws. Her own lace-trimmed kerchief covered the other.

In a low voice the sheriff spoke to her words indistinguishable to the others. She smiled at him, an enigmatic little smile, and nodded assent. Together they walked out of the room.

Ben Lyons, superintendent of the Three Nuggets mine, made private comment to the coroner, "He didn't like it, what she did."

"He wouldn't," assented Dr. Hayes. Then irrelevantly he added: "Did you ever see anything like this quick sure work? The third fellow was lucky to get away."

Lyons made a reserved comment: "He's a deadly killing machine."

"Cole is going out after the fellow that escaped. I'll hold the inquest when he gets back. I've got to see Gluck about having some coffins made. Going my way?"

They were intimate friends. As they walked down the street the superintendent of the Three Nuggets spoke his thought.

"Something queer about this, Tom. I don't understand it."

"What d'you mean?"

"Jasper Cole's prompt efficiency. It worked pretty smooth, don't you think?"

"He explained that. Descriptions of the fellows had been sent him from Cloverdale and——"

"Yes, I heard his explanation," interrupted Lyons. "It didn't somehow satisfy me. Why so sure that three stray cow-punchers were going to turn out bank robbers?"

"He wasn't sure. Chances are that the reward quickened his suspicions. One thousand dollars each for bank robbers dead or alive. Have you forgotten that?"

Lyons slapped his thigh. "Of course. That's it. I'd forgotten that. He's been waiting, hoping for a chance to collect. Probably he's been primed for these fellows ever since they rode into town."

"He said he had."

"For once he may have told the truth."

The coroner looked at his friend. "You never did like him, Ben."

"Never," the mining man returned with heat. "I think he's a cold-blooded killer."

"Don't tell anybody that but me," Hayes said dryly.

"Do you think I want to commit suicide?" his companion asked. "It's none of my affair. I'm not crowding Cole. I'll take the other side of the street."

Inside of the hour the sheriff and his posse rode out of town in pursuit of the escaped bandit. Public opinion sat in front of the Longhorn Hotel and watched them go. The events of the day had been exciting. A casual killing was no rare event, but a bank holdup, with two of the robbers shot down in their tracks as they came out of the building, was an unusual tidbit. The sheriff's support of the law had been so deadly that the town was still a little awed.

Presently Jimmie May, the keeper of the hotel, came cautiously to another angle of the case. He was a fat man, and he liked to lounge in two chairs at once. Just now he had appropriated three.

"He's a lucky bird, Cole, one way of lookin' at it," he wheezed. "Why, it ain't been but a week since the Cattlemen's Bank put out its poster about paying a thousand dollars each for the capture dead or alive of any bandits who robbed it."

"Sure, an' that poster never would have been put out if it hadn't been for the robbery at Cloverdale an' the stage holdup," another member of the self-elected jury hazarded.

"Call it luck if you like," a wizened little Methuselah differed. "Seems to me he made his own luck, Jas did.

Any one of you fellows could of had the reward if you'd earned it. Hmp! Luck nothing."

It was odd, but the name of Jasper Cole always evoked either silence when mentioned or else hot discussion, the latter only when those present were sure of one another.

CHAPTER II

Caught

BRUCE BARRY wound up through the draw and stopped on the ridge to take his bearings. He was lost in a country of a thousand cow-backed hills, all more or less alike, in a maze of valleys and blind gulches that turned out to be only pockets which led nowhere. His eyes swept the landscape. Far as the eye could see rolled undulating waves of land, huddling one upon another to the horizon edge.

Should he turn to right or to left? Either way it was a guess. Whichever he did would probably be wrong. He gave his horse a free rein and the animal turned indecisively along the ridge, moving down instead of up.

"Of course you would," Barry soliloquized aloud. "You'd pick the easiest way, Chipmunk, seeing you don't know where you're at any more than I do. Seems to me I never did see a country so filled with absentees as this."

Out of the silence a faint shout came to him. At once he drew up and turned in the saddle, one hand on the rump of the horse.

Something struck a rock beside him and threw up a

spurt of dirt. A shot sounded. A group of riders had just appeared on the ridge several hundred yards above him. One of them had fired in his direction.

Barry did not stop to ask any questions. He wheeled, lifted Chipmunk to a gallop, and raced along the ridge. Instantly the horsemen above strung out in chase. Again a rifle puffed out its challenge at him.

He knew he could not hope to outrun these horses. Probably they were fresh. His was spent with travel. But in front of him the ridge narrowed and grew rocky. Among these rocks he might find a temporary refuge until his pursuers had declared their intentions toward him.

Anxiously he looked back, measuring with his eyes the diminishing distance between him and the foremost rider. The man was gaining fast, but Barry knew that unless he or his horse was hit they would reach the boulder field in time. The horseman in the vanguard called to him, but whatever the words were they were lost in the breeze. For the moment it did not matter. Actions were more important than words just now. Barry could wait to hear anything he might have to say until after there was a barrier between his body and the other's rifle.

The young man reached the outcropping boulders and flung himself from the saddle while Chipmunk was still running. Crouched, he ran to a flat bit of sandstone jutting up and dropped down behind it.

The pursuers did not rush his position. They dragged their horses to a halt and gathered into a group for consultation. Presently one separated himself from the others and came forward a few steps.

"You'd better surrender, young fellow. We've got you. Come out from those rocks with yore hands up."

"What do you want with me?" asked Barry in a shout.

"You know what we want with you. You're bucked out, fellow. Do you give up, or shall we smoke you out?"

"I'll not surrender until I know who you are an' what I'm wanted for."

Another man moved his horse forward. "We're a sheriff's posse, an' we want you for robbin' the bank at Bonanza."

"You've got the wrong man. I've just come from Cloverdale."

"Maybe so. We'll find that out later. If you can prove that you needn't be scared to give up."

Barry put his hands up and rose from behind the flat rock. He walked toward the posse that was arresting him.

There was a shouted exclamation of protest. A horse and rider jarred roughly against the mount of the man who had first orderd Barry to surrender, and at the same instant a wild shot went singing past the surrendered man.

"We've got him, Jas. No need to shoot," someone called.

The young man with his hands up felt sick at the stomach. He knew that death had missed him by a hair's breadth, and only because the horse of the shooter had been jolted at the instant of firing. Even now he felt far from safe. The look of baffled fury on the face of the man who had been called Jas was disturbing. What kind of sheriff's posse was this which preferred to take a prisoner dead rather than alive?

"Who are you?" demanded harshly the man who had fired the shot.

"My name is Barry—Bruce Barry."

"What you doing here?"

"On my way to Bonanza."

One of the posse men grinned. He was a boyish young fellow, evidently a cowboy, whose face was a map of big freckles. "I'll bet you sure enough told the truth that time," he said. "That's exactly where you are going."

"When did you leave Cloverdale?"

Barry noticed that the man who had fired at him asked the questions. He was clearly the leader of the party. Slight, dark, and middle aged, he sat very erect in the saddle. The black, deep-set eyes were very sharp. There was somehow a look of tempered steel about him.

"Yesterday afternoon—about two o'clock. Are you the sheriff, sir?"

"I'll ask the questions. You answer them. What have you been doing last night and to-day?"

"I was directed to take a short cut an' got lost. Spent the night at a dry camp in the hills."

"Seen anybody to-day?"

"Nobody but you."

There was a change in the manner of the sheriff. He was looking keenly at Barry, a slightly puzzled frown on his face. Out of his voice the harshness had died, leaving it low, gentle, almost suave.

"Whose horse are you on?"

"My own."

"Where d'you get it?"

"Bought it at the Sunset Corral at Cloverdale."

"Who from?"

"From the fellow that runs the corral. Think his name was Abe Benson."

The sheriff made a suggestion to the man who had spoiled his shot. "Better search him, Joe."

They found no incriminating evidence on the prisoner.

"I dropped my gun back there at the rock," he explained.

"Reckon he did," agreed the man who had searched him. "Leastways it's not here."

"You might go back and pick it up, Freckles," the sheriff said courteously to the sun-kissed cowboy.

"I'll do that li'l' thing, Mr. Cole," the range rider said.

"What makes you think I'm the man you're lookin' for?" Barry asked Cole.

"You claim you're on your way to Bonanza, and we find you riding in the opposite direction. You say you got this horse at Cloverdale, but it was at Bonanza four hours ago and left on the run. Having no alibi that will hold water, you pull a fairy tale about being lost and not having seen anyone all day."

"But you're wrong," the young man cut in quickly. "This horse wasn't at Bonanza four hours ago. It couldn't be two places at once, an' I've been ridin' it all day."

"We don't doubt you've been riding it all day. The question is where. When were you last in Bonanza?"

"I've never been there."

"What were you going there for now—if you were?"

"I'm ridin' the bread line—lookin' for a job with a cow outfit."

"Where have you been working?"

"With the JK brand—in the Black Hills."

"When did you quit your job?"

"About three weeks ago."

"Why?"

"Had a run-in with the foreman."

"The Black Hills are quite some distance from here. I suppose you have no friends closer?" There was a faint flavor of irony in the voice of the sheriff, though it still held a note of suave surface courtesy.

"No, sir."

"That's too bad, Mr. Barry." Then, with a swift, stabbing look: "How about Chris Hard? Don't you know him?"

"Never heard of him."

Cole smiled a thin-lipped sardonic smile that held no heartiness of amusement. "To-day he's a safe man never to have heard of."

"I don't know what you mean," the prisoner answered.

"I didn't expect you to say you did." The sheriff's glance swept the posse and came back to Barry. "You mentioned going to Bonanza. Since we're going that way, too, we'll ride together."

The young man nodded coolly. Whatever fear or excitement he may have felt did not reach the surface. "Suits me, Sheriff. The sooner we get there the quicker you'll find you're barkin' up the wrong tree. This cow pony sure has a good alibi even if mine is a little weak."

Barry rode between the men whom he had heard called Freckles and Joe. The sheriff followed hard on the heels of his horse.

Presently Freckles murmured a word of advice. "I dunno whether you did this or not, fellow. But don't make any breaks to escape even if it looks good. The best thing Jas does is to bump off the lads who try it."

Barry could believe that without having it proved on his own person. He thanked the cowboy with a grin.

Riding toward town, his mind was busy with the problem confronting him. He did not know whether the evidence against him was strong or weak. But he had no witnesses to back up an alibi. His story about wandering around in the hills was certainly fishy. It was the only excuse he could offer and would get exactly no distance at all.

CHAPTER III

"Not the Man"

THE sheriff drew the handkerchief from the face of one of the dead outlaws. "Introducing Mr. Barry to Mr. Chris Hard," he said. "That is, if any introduction is necessary." His eyes were watching the prisoner with that piercing intentness characteristic of him.

"I never saw him before," the young man said quietly.

"Ever see this gentleman?"

Cole uncovered the face of the tall outlaw.

"Never."

"Neither of them worked with you at the JK ranch —in the Black Hills?"

"No, sir."

"Not pals of yours, then?"

"I've answered that."

"So you have." The sheriff's thin-lipped smile showed for a moment. "Come along with me, young fellow, and let's see if other people have a better memory than you have."

Barry was not handcuffed. Whatever weapons the officer had on him were not in sight. The two men

walked up the street to the bank, the sheriff on the right. If the prisoner was moved by any temptation to attempt an escape he gave no evidence of it. The two men might have been friendly acquaintances, as far as a casual onlooker could have told. But the younger man knew that at the least suspicious movement Cole would fling lead into him.

The coroner was about to hold the inquest at the bank, and all the witnesses were present. The sheriff walked in with his prisoner. He nodded to Dr. Hayes. "I'll settle my business first if it suits you, Doctor."

"All right," said the coroner.

"Well, gentlemen, is this your man?" the sheriff asked.

There was a moment of silence, during which Barry was the focus of all eyes. Those who looked at him saw a young man, sun browned, with very blue eyes steady and unflurried. He was a well-set-up youth, perhaps twenty-four years of age, graceful and muscular.

"Step into the light," the sheriff ordered.

The prisoner moved forward, and as he did so there seemed to be a rippling flow of muscles beneath the gray shirt.

The teller spoke first. "It's the man, all right."

"Looks like him," agreed Mike Flannigan, bartender. "About same height, same age, an' same complexion. Still——"

"Looks like the man to me," Manderson interrupted.

One of the other men spoke. "I reckon you snared the right bird, Sheriff. He's the guy."

From the first moment the gaze of Marigold Cole had never left the prisoner. Barry felt the intensity of that look, and his eyes came to rest in hers. He was impressed by a sense of her passionate concern. Just what emotion lay back of those big brown eyes, staring at him with such troubled eagerness, he was unable to guess. But even in the absorption of his own trouble he divined that there was something of the tragic here.

"Marigold," prompted Cole, "this the man?"

Her answer was not instant. She still looked at the young man, her being suspended in some inner struggle the meaning of which he could not read.

When she spoke it was with decision, with no vestige of doubt in her voice. "He's not the man—not the man at all."

"You mean you're not sure," her father suggested.

"I mean he's not the man."

The cashier offered an explanation: "Maybe Miss Marigold was too scared to notice close. Naturally she would be. Personally, I was busy most of the time with the heavy-set fellow. Still, when this fellow ran back through the bank——"

"It wasn't this man at all," the girl insisted.

"All I got to say is that if it's not it's his twin brother," the teller said doggedly.

"What makes you so sure, Marigold?" Cole asked.

"Because. He's like him—yes. And then he isn't. The robber had a hard look. I don't know—dissipated, kinda. Not like—like this man at all."

"Well, I reckon that's a matter of opinion," one of the depositors who had been at the holdup contributed. "If you was to ask me I'd say this guy, here present right now, might be a pretty hard nut his own self. I ain't sayin' he's the man, for I ain't sure, but if not, like Boyd says, he's a dead ringer for him. Miss Marigold may be right—an' then again she may not."

Unexpectedly Flannigan backed the girl. "Me, I don't allow to be too sure, but I'm sorta with Miss Marigold. He's real like the fellow, but seems to me there's a difference. I'll be dawggoned if I can tell what it is, but it's a fact just the same. Expression an' eyes different, if you get me."

"The robber had blue eyes, too," Manderson said.

"Yes, sir. But I saw him good while he was in our saloon. I don't reckon——" Mike stuck. He couldn't put his point more definitely in words.

"It's a pity we didn't hire someone to photograph the robber when he was here," the sheriff said with a touch of asperity.

Yet, curiously, so it seemed to Barry, Cole was relieved at his daughter's certainty. The young man could find no reason for this. The sheriff had tried to kill him on sight without giving him a chance to surrender. Now, unless Barry was misinterpreting the man's

reaction, for some reason he did not want him to be identified as the robber. Recalling the puzzled look that had come over the sheriff's face at the time of his arrest, after he had come close enough for his features to be studied, Barry believed that Cole had been in doubt then. The daughter's positive assurance that he was not the man did not annoy his captor but gave him satisfaction. Why? The taking of the third bandit meant a thousand dollars to be divided among the members of the posse. So the young man had gathered from something said by Freckles. Then why was Cole pleased to think that he had got the wrong man? It would help neither his reputation nor his pocketbook.

Into the bank came the deputy sheriff, Joe de Castro, the man who had saved the life of the prisoner. "Not the same horse the holdup jumped when he lit out, Jas. That was Shorty Hines's bronco. Same color an' about the same size as this one, but soon as Shorty saw it he said it wasn't his. Different brand. His has the Bar B on the left shoulder. This has a Circle M on the hip. I wired Cloverdale an' got an answer. Benson sold a horse answering this description to a young fellow yesterday."

"I've got a bill of sale for it if that interests you," drawled Barry.

"Why didn't you say so before?" demanded the sheriff, whirling on him.

The young man looked straight at him, insolent de-

fiance in his reckless eyes. "You were too busy shootin' at me to ask me, an' afterward you'd have brought me in if I'd proved I was the angel Gabriel."

"Not that it makes any difference," the deputy said. "He might have bought this horse yesterday at Cloverdale an' still helped rob the bank here. Like enough, these birds had relay horses cached in the hills."

"We'll hold him on suspicion," the sheriff decided. "That story about him being alone in the hills for twenty-four hours is pretty thin."

"Needs some explaining," agreed De Castro. "Want I should put him in the calaboose, Jas?"

"Yes. Iron him till he's in a cell." The sheriff turned to Manderson to ask whether the gold had checked up correctly. He was a man proud of his dignity, and he chose to ignore the challenge his prisoner had flung at him. The order to put the cowboy in irons had been sufficient answer.

Barry said to the girl in a low voice: "I'm much obliged to you, Miss, for speakin' up for me."

Marigold lifted her shy eyes to his and dropped them again. She had been bold enough in his defense. He had been then only a stranger accused of crime. But this was personal. He was a good-looking young man thanking her for service done. She had nothing to say, though she was furious at herself for the embarrassment that crimsoned her face. Awkwardly she turned away, too bashful to answer. She was a gauche child, approaching

seventeen. Her ill-fitting clothes were in marked contrast to the well-cut ones worn by her father.

"You through, Mr. Cole?" asked Hayes.

"I'm through," Cole replied.

"Then I'll ask you to range yourselves along the walls, gentlemen, so that we may proceed."

The coroner rapped for order.

CHAPTER IV

The Prisoner Asks a Question

A WOMAN came quietly into the room, but if she had entered with trumpets those present could not have been more aware of her.

The startled gaze of Marigold Cole met hers and was averted. Janice Gregg was a woman the girl must not know.

Mrs. Gregg stood near Joe de Castro and his prisoner. Barry looked at her, and the effect upon him was electric. When her violet eyes plunged into his he felt himself drowning in them.

To the deputy she spoke in a rich low voice clear as a silver bell: "Is this the bank robber, Mr. de Castro?"

"Yes, Miz Gregg, leastways he's the fellow we brought in from the hills. Claims he's not the right man. You can't prove it by me."

The woman's gaze moved back from the deputy to Barry. "He looks like a nice boy," she said.

It was curious how her words, unremarkable words anyone might have used, seemed to hold some golden quality that ran through Barry's veins like heady wine.

"I reckon he'll have a chance to prove that," De Castro said.

"I'm not the man they want," Barry heard himself saying as he came to the surface.

She smiled, so that her face was transformed as a lake is by the sparkle of sunshine on a thousand waves. "I'm sure you're not. Be good to him, Mr. de Castro. He's only a boy."

That was all. Cole came across the room, spoke to her, and took her away to a chair. A dozen kind and careless words, but she left behind her a young man with a new light in his eyes. Barry felt that something had taken place inside of him, something that had made a change in his being. An angel had come down from heaven and smiled on him.

"Who is the lady?" he presently asked the deputy in a carefully controlled voice.

A faint smile twitched at the corner of De Castro's mouth. He recognized the symptoms. A good many men in Bonanza had been afflicted with the disease this young fellow was just entering upon. It might be called Greggitis.

"The young lady's name is Marigold Cole," he said, pretending to misunderstand.

"I meant the other lady."

"Oh! Her name is Miz Gregg—Janice Gregg."

"Is she married?"

"If she wasn't they'd call her Miss, wouldn't they?"

"I s'pose she lives here with her husband."

The deputy looked at his prisoner. His voice, when he answered, held reservations. "She lives here," he said dryly.

Dr. Hayes again rapped for order and announced that the court of the coroner was now in session.

After impaneling a jury, he set about getting the evidence before its members chronologically. He traced by witnesses the movements of the three bandits from the time they had jogged down the principal street of the town and hitched their horses at the rack beside the Cattlemen's Bank to the moment that Jasper Cole's blazing gun had terminated the career of two of them.

Apparently the three men had been riders just from the range. Their dusty chaps, high-heeled boots, flannel shirts, and pinched-in Stetsons advertised as much. After tying their mounts they had walked with jingling spurs across the street at an angle to McCabe's bar. Mike Flannigan had served them drinks.

Mike described the cowboys. The oldest was a squat, heavy-set man of about forty. The second was tall and loose jointed, nearly ten years younger. He testified that he had identified the two dead men at Gluck's as the same two men. They had not stayed long in the saloon and had not been communicative. He had suggested that perhaps they came from the Piney Valley country, and the answer of the youngest had been to ask for cigars. He was a hard-eyed young fellow around

twenty-six years old. After finishing their drink they had gone out.

Hayes pointed to Barry. "Is this young man the one that asked for cigars?"

Flannigan hesitated. "Looks like him, but—I don't think so. He's younger—this one here is. I'd say he wasn't the same man. Yet he sure favors him."

From McCabe's the three men had gone down the street to Farrell's Emporium. Here they bought from a clerk tobacco and ammunition. The younger men carried single-action Colt .45 revolvers. The oldest one had a .44 in sight. The clerk noticed with surprise, so he testified, that the oldest man, the heavy-set squat one, carried another six-shooter hanging in a sling under his arm. Two-gun men were rare in his experience. He did not remember ever having seen one before.

"Did you suspect that they might be outlaws?" Dr. Hayes asked.

"No, sir, I didn't. Not even when Mr. Cole walked through the store."

There was a stir of excitement in the room.

"The sheriff was in the store while they were there, was he?"

"He passed through, clear from the front to the back door. He didn't stop."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, sir, but he looked mighty hard at the oldest man and the man looked back at him."

From Farrell's the cowboys had sauntered out into the sunshine. They seemed to be in no hurry, the evidence showed. They might be waiting for the games to open at the sporting houses. They separated. One drifted back into McCabe's, another into the post office. At exactly one o'clock they had met again at the hitch rack and walked into the bank.

The robbery had been smooth, quick work. The testimony of those inside the building gave the picture vividly. Not a soul had come into the bank during the transfer of the gold from the safe to the sacks. Not a voice had been lifted after Marigold Cole's first little scream of fright.

The oldest bandit had been the leader. After securing the gold he had warned those in the room to stay where they were, without making a sound, for at least ten minutes. A moment after the outlaws had vanished there had come the roar of guns. The youngest of the robbers had dashed back through the room and out the side door. He had flung himself on a horse and spurred the animal to an instant gallop. Those in the bank had then poured in a huddle toward the front door.

Only in one respect was there any serious divergence in the testimony. Those who had witnessed the robbery did not agree as to whether the prisoner was the third bandit. Cole himself was vague on this point.

The sheriff was the star witness. He was a slight erect man of middle age. His eyes were black and keen and

beady, his immobile face pallid. Except for a dark mustache and goatee he was clean shaved. Cole's immaculate dress reflected the vanity of the man. He wore polished boots, a Prince Albert coat, a white shirt with a neat black tie, and a soft hat set on his head at a slight angle.

Janice Gregg, motionless in her chair, watched him intently as he gave his testimony in a low clear voice. Except the questions of the coroner and the answers of the sheriff no other sound could be heard in the room. Jasper Cole was the most formidable figure in the town. His .44 had secured for him an ominous respect. Men and women wondered what was going on in the brain back of the cold gambler's face. Were there in the man any of the kindly human emotions of friendship and sympathy?

The prisoner unexpectedly supplied the sensation of the hour.

"Did you give these men any chance to surrender before you killed them?" he asked Cole quietly after the coroner had told the witness he was through with him.

The sheriff's surprised eyes met and clashed with those of the accused man. For a moment he was silent, as though disdaining to answer. Then he spoke harshly.

"No chance. It suited me to collect them dead rather than alive."

"Was that why you tried to murder me after I had my hands up when you took me in the hills?"

Cole glared angrily at the young man, but his verbal answer was to De Castro. "Take this fellow back to the jail and put him in irons, Joe."

The verdict of the coroner's jury was that the deceased came to their deaths from gunshot wounds at the hands of Jasper Cole after having robbed the Cattlemen's Bank. It added a rider that the shooting was entirely justified and complimented the county on having a sheriff able to enforce the law.

CHAPTER V

The Killer's Daughter

EVER since she could remember Marigold Cole had been different from other girls. So much more than they she had lived in an inner world which was a refuge from reality. Outside, she had been a dark, disdainful creature with stormy eyes, ready to flare into passionate reprisal if touched, a child sufficient to her own needs, contemptuous of friendships. Inside, the real Marigold was not like that at all.

Nobody except herself knew the hours of bitter shame she endured. Nobody guessed her passionate need of friends, her envy of the light-hearted girls who snubbed her cruelly because she was who she was. Marigold would have loved to put her arm around other girls' waists and giggle with them and whisper little secrets to them. But she must go her way alone and pretend that she would not play with them for anything.

The trouble was that she was her father's daughter. Jasper Cole took his place among men. Judge Harden called him by his first name. Ben Lyons, who ran the big Three Nuggets mine, was always scrupulously polite to the sheriff. Manderson was full of unctuous

smiles when they met. But their daughters did not speak to Marigold except when they were forced to do so in the schoolroom. She was outside the pale because her father owned and ran the Silver Palace, a gambling house and dance hall. Marigold knew none of the women her father employed, but the good mothers of Bonanza damned her socially as though she had been one of them.

"You can't touch pitch and not be defiled," Mrs. Harden was wont to say sententiously. She spoke out of an experience which had been varied. For she had been a waitress in a railroad eating house when her husband first met her, taking devoted care of a crippled little brother. These many years she had been trying to live down a secret wholly creditable to her. That was why she had to be an unusually severe censor of others.

There was another reason why Marigold had to walk through life alone. She was the daughter of a killer. The brand of Cain was on her. Because Jasper Cole was so dangerous he could command personal respect, but he could not have imposed upon the wives of the men he knew a kindly attitude toward his daughter. Nor would he have cared to do so. For between him and this child no springs of affection flowed.

They were in a state of tacit warfare, carefully suppressed. It was not only that there was no sympathetic understanding; there were no points of spiritual contact. There was an active antipathy. Since the death of her

mother ten years earlier Jasper had never laid a hand on her. Whenever he spoke to her it was with an ironic courtesy or with mocking sarcasm. Yet she was afraid of him and felt she wore the collar of a slave.

To-night he sat smoking a cigar after dinner. The window blinds were drawn and he faced the door. Under his left arm a revolver hung suspended in a sling. Jasper Cole never took chances that could be eliminated. He was in the safety of his own home, but he knew that because he was a killer he was a marked man. There were those who hated him for what he had done; there were others whose trigger fingers itched to destroy him only for the renown of slaying so notorious a gunman.

Marigold was busy clearing the table.

He watched her meditatively as he smoked.

"So you're sure this Barry is not the bank robber?" He put the statement as a question.

"I should think they'd all see that. Just because the two are about the same age and size——"

"What made you so sure? How were they different?"

"I can't tell you how any more than I can tell how Judge Harden and Mr. Lyons are different. But I know them apart."

"Very pretty business of him thanking you for your help and you blushing like a simpleton. But I think, if you please, we won't have any nonsense."

The angry color flushed her cheek. She flung a look of hatred at him.

"Interesting to learn from you that this man isn't dissipated and hasn't a hard look," he went on, quoting what she had said at the bank. "Do you consider yourself an authority on dissipated men?"

She walked into the kitchen and stayed there. When she had finished washing the dishes he had gone down town.

Marigold was afraid of her father, but not abjectly so. As a little child, before the death of her mother, she had always resented the ailing woman's dread of her husband. Jessie Cole would watch the man for her cue with eyes like those of a whipped dog. Even then, on her mother's account, Marigold had hated the man, and she had vowed in her flaming heart that she would never let herself be cowed into submission like her mother. She never had. She knew that some day the issue would be drawn between them, and that when that day came she would set her strong young will to oppose him.

To-day, for the first time, she had seen the killer at work. She still shuddered, whenever she let her mind revert to it, at the picture of Cole standing astride his victim, fury blazing in his eyes. It was horrible for her to realize that she was the daughter of Jasper Cole.

That was why, perhaps as a refusal to identify herself with him in any way, perhaps with some illogical feeling of atonement for what he had done, Marigold had lied to save the third bandit. Surely two were enough to sate her father's eagerness to destroy. The punishment

of the misguided men had been severe enough without locking this boy up in the penitentiary for twenty years.

When she had seen her father come into the bank with the prisoner she had made up her mind to save the young man. He was so boyish, his blue eyes so clear. No doubt she had done wrong, but she was glad of it. And it was true that when he thanked her he had been different than he had been when he was holding up the bank. Perhaps all men looked like wild beasts when they were entering a trap and had to turn snarling on their hunters. Marigold realized that she knew very little about men. She had not gone far in life, though already it had mauled her a good deal. All the simple human relationships had become distorted because she could not come to them with the normal attitude of a girl of her age.

For many years she had not known what love was. Friendship had never come into her life. She felt herself an outcast from society. It was no wonder that she had become bitter.

For the most part she made her own clothes, and she knew she looked like a fright. She had seen the other girls giggling to one another at her uncouthness. Ever since her mother's death she had been the Cinderella of the town, a Cinderella without any fairy godmother.

CHAPTER VI

Concerning Kind Hearts and Cornets

BRUCE BARRY found that it was easier to get into jail than out. He was held, pending an investigation, on the charge of robbing the bank. The sheriff had written to the Black Hills to get information about him and was trying to trace his movements for the week prior to the holdup. More than once he had De Castro bring the prisoner to his office for questioning. These quizzes brought out nothing new. If Barry knew more than he had told he did not make any slips to betray the fact.

Usually the deputy brought him in food from a Chinese restaurant, but near the end of the second week De Castro came in grinning with a dinner of an entirely different quality. Out of a daintily packed basket he took fried chicken, browned sweet potatoes, fresh peas, delicious coffee, apple jelly, and custard pie.

"Where from?" asked Barry, his eyes opening.

"Brought by a colored lady," explained the deputy.

He had found a cigar tucked away in one corner of the basket, and there was a note wrapped around it. This

he read, before handing it to the prisoner. The message, written in beautiful script, was short.

Wishing you a happy release.
JANICE GREGG.

The young man's heart warmed to her kindness. It was so unexpected, so generous. The dinner was delicious, but it was the spirit prompting the gift which thrilled him.

"She's right good to folks in trouble," De Castro explained. "Kinda specializes in lame ducks, Miz Gregg does."

Barry could have done without the explanation. He would have preferred to think that her interest in him was not inspired wholly by pity, but any interest was better than none.

While Barry was eating Cole came down the corridor, immaculately clad as usual. His face grew grimmer at sight of the banquet spread on the bunk.

"Charley's bill of fare is certainly improving," he said in a low voice charged with irony. "Or is this a Fourth of July celebration?"

"Miz Gregg sent Rebecca in with a basket," De Castro told the sheriff. "You know how kind she is to folks in trouble."

Cole caught sight of the note and picked it up.

"That belongs to me," Barry said quickly.

The officer read the message. His eyes, cold and steelly, met those of the prisoner.

"Nothing belongs to you while you're here." He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

Barry flushed angrily. "You've no right to take that. It's mine."

Ignoring the protest, Cole turned to his deputy. "What's this mean, Joe? Notes from outsiders to the prisoners. Food sent in by other parties. What's the idea? Charley's grub not good enough for miscreants that hold up banks?"

"Two-three times before Miz Gregg has sent in a dinner to other guys we've had here. I didn't know you objected, Jas."

"Well, I do. It's got to be stopped. Women get slushy over criminals. I'll have none of it where I'm in charge. Don't let it happen again. No messages. No special food without my permission." Cole's low voice had the sting of a whiplash.

"It's yore say-so, Jas," the deputy acquiesced.

The sheriff turned to the young man sitting on the bed. He spoke curtly. "I've heard from the Black Hills. Burr Graham, who owns the JK, says he never had a puncher named Bruce Barry."

The range rider smiled hardily. If the news disturbed him he did not let the fact reach the surface. "I was afraid he'd say that."

The black eyes of Cole plunged down into his. "So you lied to me. You admit it."

Barry picked up the cigar, found a match, and lit up before he answered: "No, sir. I told the truth. I worked for Burr Graham two years, an' I quit him like I said, a li'l' more than a month ago."

"Yet you say you expected him to deny it."

"I was passin' under another name then."

"Why?"

"For private reasons of my own."

"You were wanted by the law somewhere else."

"No, sir."

"Well, I don't believe a word of it. You've dodged around among lies ever since I caught you. I've made up my mind. You're the fellow that held up the bank here with Chris Hard and his partner, and I'm going to put you through."

The young man puffed out a cloud of smoke slowly, then looked deliberately at the officer. It was odd, but he felt burning in him a hatred for Jasper Cole not to be accounted for by the surface circumstances. He could not deny that more than suspicion pointed to him as the third bandit. Without doubt he ought to get busy in an effort to clear himself. Instead, he murmured, almost insolently: "Why not? It'll be worth a thousand dollars to you more or less."

Barry saw the sudden flare of rage in the sheriff's

face and for a moment regretted his indiscretion. He heard the man's upper teeth grinding against the lower. Then, abruptly, as though he could not trust himself to stay, Cole turned on his heel and walked out of the cell.

As De Castro gathered up the dishes and put them in the basket he made one blistering comment which the young man took as applicable to himself. "Of all the durned fools!" With which sufficient summary he followed his chief.

The range rider ruefully agreed with him. He had done his cause no good. Jasper Cole was too powerful and too little restrained by scruples for one in his position to make an enemy of. Even now he did not quite know why he had flung down his fool challenge; probably because of resentment at the man's arrogance.

Yet Barry felt humility would not have averted Cole's hostility. He had sensed, as soon as the sheriff read the note, a changed point of view. The report from the JK ranch had already had weight. The later incident had crystallized the man's attitude, though why this should be so the prisoner could not tell. To be just to his captor, the officer very likely honestly believed him guilty and saw no reason why he should not collect the reward for his capture and conviction.

Late that afternoon De Castro came grumbling to the cell door. "Know any reason, young fellow, why I should get into trouble on yore account?"

"Not any," admitted Barry. "Does that mean you're going to?"

"An old donker here wants to see you. I dunno as I'll let him in."

"Who is he?"

"Name's Caleb McCoy."

"Never heard of him."

"Well, he claims to have heard of you. Mentions right important business."

The young fellow grinned. "Well, I got plenty of time to give to any business that comes up. Tell him I'll be here waitin' at the gate for him."

"If I let him in."

"I reckon you'll let him in. Why not? You're hired to keep folks in your calaboose, not to keep 'em out."

Joe de Castro rubbed his unshaven chin. "I got no orders to let anyone see you, but then I got none not to. Broad as it's long, looks like."

Barry's smile could be very winning. It gave his eyes a friendly warmth. "You've got my curiosity all stirred up," he said.

"Well, McCoy's a harmless, stove-up old geezer. Usta be a buffalo hunter, I've heard. I dunno why he shouldn't see you. This ain't Rooshia, even if Jas thinks he's a czar. But no shenanigan, boy. Promise me that. No funny business about fixin' up an escape on me."

"No shenanigan," Barry agreed. "I like yore hotel too well to want to leave."

"Hmp! I know all about that. You don't need to load me. If you had half a chance you'd make a break."

"No, sir, I wouldn't. Believe me or not. I came to Bonanza to stay, for a while anyhow, an' I don't aim to leave till I'm good an' ready."

"Reckon I'll keep the calaboose locked for a while yet anyhow. Well, I'll send Grandpa up to powwow with you. But I'll be blamed if I know why I treat you so doggoned well."

"It's yore kind heart, Joe," the prisoner told him with friendly mockery. "Onct I had a schoolmarm usta read us pieces, an' one piece said kind hearts were more than coronets."

"Well, cornets ain't so much. Gimme a good old-fashioned fiddle for real music."

"This wasn't a horn. It was a kind of hat these belted earls wear when they got all their war paint on."

The deputy departed along the corridor, still grumbling.

CHAPTER VII

"Afoot in the Desert an' a Hundred Miles to Water"

An old man came limping down the corridor to Barry's cell. He was shrunken as a last year's winter pippin, and from his faded blue eyes radiated wrinkles etched in by the untempered light of many summer suns.

"Name's McCoy—Caleb McCoy," he said by way of introduction, offering his hand through the bars.

"I'll tell you later whether I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. McCoy," the young man answered with a smile to mitigate the effect of the words. "My name is Bruce Barry."

The little man cackled. "When a stranger tells you his name it ain't polite to doubt him—not out loud. If you say you're James G. Blaine, why, it'll be all right with me."

"But you won't believe me?"

"Mostly I live under my hat, so what disbelievin' I do will be personal an' private, Mr. Blaine."

"Barry."

The old buffalo hunter caught up his mistake with a little gesture of self-reproach. "Sure—Barry. I'll be forgettin' my own name next first thing I know."

"Sorry I can't offer you a chair, Mr. McCoy. Joe ought to put one out there for my visitors. So my name's not Barry. What is it?"

McCoy's more or less toothless grin was wise. "You know better than I do. If you claim it's Barry——"

"I might be wrong. What names have you that would suit me?"

"Offhand, you look like Clay Ballard might be a fittin' name for you. But sho! one name is good as another an' maybe better."

"If my name is Ballard, why should I call myself Barry?"

"Right off, I told you I was too polite to go into questions like that." Then, with sly innocence, he added: "Maybe Barry is yore professional name."

"You mean the one I rob banks under. What makes you think my name is Ballard?"

"I usta live in the Black Hills, young fellow. I know Buck Sommers, foreman of the JK outfit. So, being as I was writin' to him, I happened to mention there was a young fellow in jail here claimed he had worked for him. To-day I got an answer."

"An' Buck said?"

"He'd never heard of any Bruce Barry, but a young buckaroo named Clay Ballard had got his time an' mavericked off that range about a month or so ago. I kinda put two an' two together."

"Real kind of you to take so much interest in my af-

fairs," Barry drawled. "Are you figurin' on dividing the reward with Cole?"

The faded eyes quickened to venomous life. "Cole can't divide anything with me. I don't want anything that's his, an' the only thing of mine he can have is a pill from my .44."

Barry looked at his visitor, surprised at the blaze of energy his question had evoked. Their talk had been persiflage, though it had covered serious intent. They had been sparring for an opening, and like a bolt out of a sunny sky had exploded this threat.

"I gather you don't like him," the young man said dryly. His interest had quickened immensely, but he was a poker player and did not show it. A face mobile as a stone wall is sometimes an asset.

"If he was roastin' in hell I'd shovel coal on the fire."

There could be no mistaking the sincerity of the little man's vehemence. Barry gave him rope.

"I'm not real fond of him myself," he said.

"You hadn't ought to be. He killed yore father."

"What!" The word came out a cry of amazement.

"Or had it done. I don't know which."

"What do you mean? Tell me what you know."

"You're Clay Ballard, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"An' you came out here to check up on yore father's death?"

"Maybe so."

"Because you got an anonymous letter sayin' he had met with foul play."

"Who told you that?"

"I wrote the letter."

"Then you said in it too much or too little."

"I said just enough. It brought you out here, didn't it?"

"Yes."

"Talk turkey, boy. You didn't help rob the bank, did you?"

"No."

"An' you changed yore name so you could ask questions without being suspected."

"That's right. Now you answer questions. How do you know Jasper Cole killed my father?"

"I don't know it for sure. Not if you're askin' me for evidence that would stand in a law court. But it looks that way to me. I'd bet on it."

"What reason had he to kill him? Tell me the whole story."

"I can't. I can piece this an' that together, sort of. If you've got time——"

"Time!" the prisoner echoed. "I've got twenty-four hours a day to do nothin' else but listen, thanks to Mr. Cole. Spill yore story, Mr. McCoy."

"I never met yore father but onct. That was at Cloverdale four years ago, right soon before he was killed. If I'm any judge Curt Ballard was a straight

man. So when I heard he'd been shot for rustlin' calves ——"

"My father killed because he was a rustler? I never heard that before," cried the young man, the color washing from his face. "An' it's a damned lie, I don't care who says it."

"What I thought, too. But I was down in the Big Bend country at the time an' got no details. Anyhow, it wasn't any business of mine. There was war on between the big cattlemen and the small settlers. The big fellows claimed the nesters were stealin' them blind an' no justice could be got in the courts. The settlers told another story—how the big brands wanted to drive the little fellows outa the country. I reckon there was some truth in both sides. O' course you've heard how the cow kings hired a bunch of Texans an' invaded Baker River to wipe out the rustlers, an' how they would have been cleaned out their own selves if the soldiers hadn't saved 'em. Well, it was before that yore father got killed."

"We heard he was shot accidentally while huntin'."

"Accidental on purpose, I'd say. An' he wasn't huntin', either. He was right there at his cabin on Elk Creek. He was shot down when he came out in the mornin' to get a bucket of water. That's common talk in this country. You know how things get whispered around."

"Who did it?"

"If you ask me who pulled the trigger I'll tell you I don't know. But it's known Jas Cole was hand in glove with the big outfits an' that he went clear to Denver to meet Buchanan of the Bar BB who was runnin' the campaign for the cattlemen. That was three weeks before yore father was killed. From there he went into the Baker River country an' took with him a fellow called Cash Schmitt. Cole paid the railroad fare of Schmitt, who was flat broke. Later, after the killin', Schmitt showed up in Cheyenne with a roll of bills an' blew the whole wad. While he was drunk he talked. Said there was plenty more where that came from an' that being a good shot was the easiest way he knew to earn money."

The young man steadied his quavering voice. "Why did they murder my father? No more honest man ever lived."

"Don't ask me. Yore guess is as good as mine." McCoy hesitated before he ventured a cautious addition. "Sometimes a man's friends get him into trouble."

"Friends!" repeated the prisoner. It was his turn to hesitate. Twice he started to say something before he got it out. "Do you mean friends—or kinfolks?"

The faded eyes of the old buffalo hunter grew gentle. "Son, I ain't got a thing to go on except gossip an' hearsay. You know how onreliable they are."

Out of eyes afraid Clay Ballard looked steadily at him. "My brother, I reckon," he suggested.

"It's claimed he belonged to a bunch of rustlers."

Young Ballard's heart sank. Very likely this was true. Even as a little fellow his brother Mitchell had been reckless and unrestrained. It had been impossible to keep him in school or at home. As he grew older he had got into trouble frequently. He was naturally turbulent and defiant of the law. Driven from home, he had gone to the Baker River country a refugee. His father had followed him in the hope of steadying the young man. It was possible that Curtis Ballard had paid with his life for the wrongdoing of his son.

"An' my brother—what became of him?" Clay asked.

McCoy lifted a wrinkled hand, as though to ward off the blow he must deal. "Boy, I've got to hurt you. Maybe he didn't get a square deal. I dunno about that. The cattlemen were mighty anxious to make examples of some of the nesters. They convicted him of brand blottin' an' sent him to the penitentiary. I reckon he's there now."

Clay flinched. He came of sturdy pioneer stock that had always lived on the frontier. From Pennsylvania to Kentucky, from Kentucky to Missouri, from Missouri to Nebraska, and from Nebraska to the Black Hills—for generations the Ballards had trekked after the diminishing wilderness. The smoke of their neighbors' fires had vexed the adventurous blue eyes of the males of the family, and they had packed and pushed on to uncharted deserts. Sturdy and self-reliant they were,

proud of the fact that their word was as good as a bond; but there had always been a streak of wildness in them, a resentment of the restraints of civilization. In Mitchell this had been the dominant quality of his character.

"Pretty soon we'll both be there," Clay said bitterly. "One for rustling, the other for robbin' a bank."

"When Jasper Cole learns who you are he'll put you there if he can. Because it'll be the safest place to have you in case you should learn what he'd done to yore father."

"He doesn't need that as a motive. He hates me already."

"Then you're in trouble up to yore neck. He's got a lot of influence around here, an' he won't stick at a thing. You've got to play yore hand close to yore belly, son. I got you into this, an' I aim to help get you out."

"What can you do? I reckon he knows you hate him."

"No, sir, he don't. Fact is, he never looked twice at me. I'm nobody, an' he's Napoleon Bonaparte an' George Washington rolled into one by his way of it."

"I've got no evidence back of me," Clay said. "Cole's daughter said I wasn't the man that held up the bank, but now he's got it in for me she'll likely change her testimony."

At the mention of Cole's daughter the face of the little man changed. It contorted to a queer grimace, as though some tide of emotion had been stirred in him.

"I—I wish she wasn't in it," he murmured, apparently to himself.

"No use wishin'. We're up against a fact. She'll do as he tells her, an' I'll get a free trip over the road to join Mitch." The young man's voice was harsh and bitter.

McCoy's washed-out eyes looked far away. "I reckon I must have a talk with Marigold," he said, still as one ruminating aloud.

"A lot of good that'll do me," the prisoner said.

"You can't ever tell," the old-timer replied.

"What good could it do?" demanded the man who had called himself Bruce Barry and now called himself Clay Ballard. He spoke impatiently. By his own admission the old-timer was of no importance in the community. "How do you come into this anyhow? How come you hate this Jasper Cole? What's he done to you?"

The little man stiffened. "Never you mind what he's done to me. That's my business. We're discussin' yore affairs."

"So that's the way of it, eh? I'm to give you my confidence, but you don't want to trust me with yores. I've got different notions, Mr. McCoy. It won't be thataway."

"Why not? You're the fellow that's in a hole, not me. I would judge you hadn't so many friends out this way you could afford to chuck any out."

"You're my friend, are you?"

"Yes, sir, I am." The old buffalo hunter bristled. "An' I don't care much for you at that. You're too all-fired cocky."

"I see. You're my friend, but you don't like me."

"Have it yore own way. What's eatin' you, boy? You're afoot in the desert an' it's a hundred miles to water. This ain't no time to git biggity an' play like you're the big auger when all you are is a kid in a hell of a hole. By yore own way of it Cole is sore at you already. If he's sure enough on the hook he won't play any limit game. No, sir, he'll burn his breeches behind him, as you might say. Don't you make any mistake about that, or you'll never make another. He's bad. When you take a look at his record you know he's a mighty good guy not to crowd."

"Have I been crowdin' him?"

"I don't say you have. I say don't. What's he mad at you for? Because you asked him that fool question at the inquest?"

Clay hesitated. "A personal matter."

"Personal! You don't mean he suspicions who you are?"

"No." Since he wanted information Clay decided to tell more. "He's on his ear because a lady was nice to me—sent me in a real dinner with trimmin's."

"Miz Gregg?" the little man asked quickly.

"Yes."

"Oh, Lordy—Lordy!" McCoy flung up his hands. "I'll be dawged if I ever knew such a fellow as you for huntin' trouble."

"Meanin' just what?"

"Meanin' that you'd better sit down an' play in a nest of rattlers than get friendly with that lady."

Clay answered stiffly: "If you've got anything to say against Mrs. Gregg——"

"Not a thing," the buffalo hunter interrupted. "She's prettier'n a painted wagon an' she's got the kindest heart in Bonanza. Point is, she's dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"As an open keg of powder around a camp fire."

"Why?"

The old-timer shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Put yore cards on the table," insisted Clay. "How's she dangerous?"

"Some women are made thataway," McCoy answered reluctantly. "Men go crazy about 'em. If you must know, three-four men have gone to hell on a shutter account of Janice Gregg."

"Cole killed them? That what you mean?"

"Not Cole. It was before he knew her. She has followed the frontier camps for some time. She was at Tombstone before she came here."

The hot blood beat into the range rider's face beneath the tan. "What do you mean—followed the camps?"

The faded skim-milk eyes looked into those of the prisoner without wavering. "I reckon you understand English, boy."

"Her husband?"

"Never heard of the gent."

A wave of sickness passed through Clay. He asked no more questions. He did not want to look at McCoy. His impulse was to hide his eyes until he was alone.

The old man showed unexpected tact. "Well, I'll be rockin' along," he said in a brisk, matter-of-fact voice. "See you later, son. Don't you give up. We'll maybe get you outa here yet. Cole ain't the Shah of Persia."

He went limping down the corridor.

It was beginning to get dark. Clay lay down on his bunk and turned his face to the wall.

Because he was of the old outdoor West Clay had fought for his own hand all his life. He had ridden out blizzards and stampedes, had stood up to bullies and bad men. Without flinching he had endured biting cold, appalling thirst, and staggering fatigue. These were in the day's work, and only weaklings whined. It was up to a man to be a stoic.

But what McCoy had told him was another matter. It touched his faith in women. Like most of his class, he believed profoundly in the goodness of women who did not make a living by pandering to men's passions. All the young idealism of his nature—and beneath the hard crust of his competent self-reliance he had a

reservoir of romanticism—had gone out reverently to this woman who had seemed to him the incarnation of beauty and beneficence. The boy in him cried out at the hurt which had been dealt by the old man's warning. Inside, he was a river of weeping woe.

CHAPTER VIII

A Woman's Way

JASPER COLE walked straight from the jail to the house where Janice Gregg lived. It was a log cabin of five rooms, and except for Rebecca she was the only occupant. In the raw mining town no other place had so much the look of home as this. There were marigolds and fuchsias and roses in the little garden. A crimson rambler ran riotously along a porch trellis.

The room to which Rebecca admitted the sheriff reinforced the impression that a woman of taste had created its atmosphere. There was a piano and there were books in abundance. No other room in Bonanza had so many of the latter except Judge Harden's law office. The character of the books gave perhaps some insight into the restless mind of their owner. Side by side with *The Man Without a Country* were *In Memoriam*, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Renan's *Life of Jesus*, E. P. Roe's *Barriers Burned Away*, and a fashion magazine. By the use of furniture from an earlier and a simpler period Janice Gregg had avoided the ugliness of upholstery in the prevailing mode.

While Cole waited for Mrs. Gregg he strode impatiently up and down the carpet, the brow above the dark, deep-set eyes knitted to a frown of annoyance. Rebecca had told him that her mistress would be in at once, but it was ten minutes before she appeared.

"You take your time, Janice," her visitor said.

She lifted an inquiring look. "Are you in a hurry, my friend?" she asked lightly, sinking into a chair with undulant grace.

"What does this mean?" he asked, and he gave her the note that had accompanied the dinner sent Clay Ballard.

The woman glanced at it. "He gave this to you?"

"I took it from him. You wish this bandit a happy release. Why?"

She twisted the note in her long slender fingers before she raised the long lashes veiling the violet eyes. "Are you asking—or ordering?" she parried.

He struggled with the imperiousness of his mood. When he spoke again his voice was in the low note of courtesy he affected toward women. "I'm sorry, Janice. I was annoyed. With some right, I think. While I'm preparing to send this miscreant to the penitentiary I find you in the camp of the enemy."

"Is he your enemy?"

"I'm not splitting hairs. He's a criminal."

"Is he? I'm not so sure. He looks like a nice boy to me."

"So you've decided he is to attend your chariot in chains. I suppose it's an added attraction in him that he's a bank robber."

"It might be—if he were." She gave him her provocative smile, looking at him out of half-veiled quizzical eyes. "I've always been fascinated by villains, you know. But he's not that. He's just a wild, foolish boy, and I'm sorry for him."

"You may prepare to be sorrier," he said grimly. "He'll get twenty years. I'll see to that."

"Why, Jasper?" Her melodious voice had the note of lightness amounting almost to indifference. "Is he worth so much energy?"

He bowed, smiling thinly. "It's worth some energy, dear lady, to teach you a lesson."

"Oh, so I'm being taught a lesson?"

There was a hint of adventure in the bright eyes. She asked her question with an air of mock deference, hands folded meekly in her lap.

Ben Lyons had once compared Cole to a hawk. He looked like one now as he stood poised above her, rapacious orbs gleaming down from above the Roman nose. The man was possessive. He wanted to absorb her, mind, body, and emotions. And he knew the futility of his desire. She would never belong to him in any but a superficial sense. He was not even sure that he would ever win her that far. Over her was the subtle shadow of the woman who knew, but paradoxically she had the

charm of mystery, of unplumbed personality, that made her always tantalizingly desirable.

"If you please," he acquiesced.

"But isn't it a waste of ammunition to bother about this infant instead of picking a real man?" Her glance slanted derisively up at him. It suggested that nothing was of less importance to her than the fate of this youth, but that she was a little disappointed in Jasper Cole.

He chose to ignore this implication. "Your smiles are for all men, Janice. You can't let one escape, can you?"

Curled indolently in the chair, Janice gave him one of her most captivating. By way of explanation she quoted gayly some verses she had lately read.

> "Pray, what is lighter than a feather?
> Dust, my friend, in summer weather.
> What's lighter than the dust, I pray?
> The wind that blows them both away.
> What is lighter than the wind?
> The lightness of a woman's mind.
> And what is lighter than the last?
> Ah, now, my friend, you have me fast!"

Cole's mind caught at the last line, giving it a twist not intended. "I never have you fast. Has any man ever had, I wonder? Does anyone really know you? Do you know yourself?"

"You're quite Socratic to-day."

"I've never met a woman so—so exasperating."

"Why do you keep on—liking me?"

He strode across to the chair where she sat, took her chin in his hand, and looked down at her with a frowning savage hunger in his eyes.

"I don't know. Do you?"

She could have given several reasons. One was that he was not sure of her, that he could look such a little way into her motives and her emotions.

"I'm only a woman," she mocked. "If my lord and master doesn't understand, how could I be expected to know?"

He kissed her smiling lips, kissed them with a passionate intensity that would have been a revelation to those who knew him only when he was wearing his mask of cold inhuman dignity.

"Let this Barry alone," he told her. "The fellow lied to me and I'm going to see him convicted. His alibi won't stick."

"I don't know any command easier to obey than that," she murmured. "He's nothing to me, and I don't see why he should be to you. But I don't think he's the right man—not the one I saw galloping past the house on his way out of town after the robbery."

"He's the man. Don't fool yourself about that. I stood within ten feet of him at Farrell's."

After Cole had gone Janice Gregg sat motionless in her chair for some minutes. She was thinking. When she arose it was with a fixed purpose. She was going forth to

war, but it was to be invisible warfare in which she was not to appear as a combatant. Her weapons were to be those of her sex, so she spent a long time at the niceties of the feminine toilet. Her gown she chose with great care. It had been made in New York, and it was one designed to enhance her feminine seductiveness. No matron in Bonanza could have worn one less indecorous, yet somehow, sheathing closely as it did the loveliness of her body, it stressed the vital appeal of her.

She took Rebecca with her. The colored woman and her market basket gave an air of domestic homeliness Janice wanted to add to the picture. She did not want to leave the impression of a siren but of a charming woman troubled and appealing for aid to chivalrous man.

Her first visit was to the bank cashier Manderson. He was a bald-headed plump man with a youngish, tallowy face. Janice knew that she was in his thoughts a good deal. She had uncanny reactions to the feelings of men about her. She shrewdly divined that he was very careful not to let his wife guess the interest he had in this fascinating woman who lived beyond the pale.

Janice Gregg's violet eyes looked into his. He felt a queer fluttering at his heart.

"May I see you alone for a few minutes, Mr. Manderson, if you are not too busy?" she said in the low voice that was like the ripple of a brook set to music.

The man caught his breath in surprise. She had never before shown any evidence of realizing that he was

more than a piece of furniture in the office. He was flustered and let her see it.

"Yes. Yes, indeed, Mrs. Gregg. This way, please." He led her into the small office reserved for important consultations. The door he closed. Excitement had sent a flush into his pasty cheeks.

Her gaze, steadily in his, held him helpless as a limed bird. She came directly to the point. "I want you to do me a great favor, Mr. Manderson."

He was immensely flattered and at the same time fearful. A conventional little rabbit, he wanted to be sure before he promised that he was not to be involved in any publicity with her.

"Of course. Anything, Mrs. Gregg. Anything I can do for you—that is, er, anything——"

She hastened to reassure him. It was no part of her wish to alarm him.

"It's an entirely personal and private matter, Mr. Manderson, and I come to you because I can rely upon your honor that you will treat it confidentially."

He fairly beamed on her. His fat hand covered the neighborhood of his stomach as he bowed to her. "You may rely on me—absolutely." How much, he wondered, did she want to borrow? And to what extent could he accommodate her?

"It's about this young fellow Barry who is in jail here," she said. "I want your advice and help, Mr. Manderson. He's hardly more than a boy, and he's going

to be sent to the penitentiary for most of his life. And I feel sure he didn't rob the bank. I saw the robber as he was leaving town."

"But with him going so fast——"

"I'm going to tell you something I haven't told anybody else, Mr. Manderson. I—I'd rather not have it known, if you please. He wasn't going so fast—not all the time. You know there's a cut bank at the corner just before you come to my house. He swung around it. I was walking to town with a pink parasol up. It startled his horse. The animal jumped sideways and slipped, throwing the rider to the ground. He lay there a moment, stunned. I had a very good look at him, and the man was not this Barry boy."

"Hm! If you are sure, Mrs. Gregg——"

"I'm quite sure. In a way he favored him, but he wasn't the same person."

"I s'pose the fellow jumped up, grabbed his horse, and rode on."

It had not been that way at all, but Mrs. Gregg's smile was full of admiration at his perspicacity.

"You tell it just as though you had been there," she said.

"I don't reckon he'd linger long with Jas and his six-shooter ready to begin operations again soon as they caught up with him."

"I shouldn't think so. Well, what are we to do? I must have your advice, Mr. Manderson."

"You must come forward and tell what you know."

She shook her head. "That's just what I can't do." Her wistful eyes plunged into his. "Mr. Cole wants him convicted. I don't want to cross him—not unless it's absolutely necessary. But you're a man, an important, forceful one in the community, known to be shrewd and observant. If you say Barry isn't the man——"

"But you see I'm not sure. During the holdup I was busy getting the money for the other one, this Chris Hard. I didn't get much chance to size up the young fellow."

"Then say so. Say you don't think he's the one. You don't now, do you?"

"Well, of course, if you're sure——"

She let him get no further, but jumped to the assumption that he had consented to her wish. "I *am* sure." Her little hand went out to his plump one with a warm, swift pressure that set his heart pumping faster. "I knew a strong man like you would not stand by and see an innocent boy sent to the penitentiary. I was sure you would not let his life be ruined unjustly."

Her words committed Manderson much more than he had intended. But how could he disappoint a woman such as this? Surely not while palm throbbed intimately against palm and her velvety eyes were resting in his with that deep earnestness which had almost the effect of a kiss.

Manderson capitulated unconditionally. He knew he

might have a few bad moments when Cole's black gaze challenged his testimony. But after all there was nothing the sheriff could do about it. A man had to tell the facts as he saw them.

Janice Gregg tampered in turn with the other witnesses. She told none of the men as much as she had told Manderson, and she had not confided to him one half of what she knew. Her methods varied. With the bartender Flannigan she frankly asked his confidence and support, giving him no facts and relying simply on his friendship.

"I never did think the boy did it," he told her. "I'll go all the way with you, ma'am."

She rested with assurance on his promise.

CHAPTER IX

The Lost Lady

IT WAS in character for Janice Gregg never to have exchanged a word with Marigold Cole. From afar she had watched the lonely girl and had been sorry for her isolation, but she knew that the circumstances of her own life barred her from any friendship with the sheriff's daughter.

On the evening of the same day upon which she had talked with Manderson and the other witnesses Janice made occasion to waylay Marigold on an unfrequented path by the river.

She lifted the point of her parasol across the lane as the girl approached. "There is something I must say to you, Miss Cole."

Marigold brought back her averted gaze. As she looked at this woman, so lovely in face and figure, so daintily gowned and so perfectly poised, she felt the color flooding her face. She did not want to blush. It annoyed her that she did, but she could not help herself. The reason for it was not only that Janice Gregg was bad. She was a part of the disgrace that attached to the

Cole family. Rumor had tied together the names of Janice Gregg and her father.

Big brown eyes fixed on Mrs. Gregg, the girl waited awkwardly for what she had to say. She would have been surprised at the fugitive thought flashing through the mind of the woman, that the child would be very pretty if somebody would take the trouble to dress her properly.

"It's about this young man in prison, this Bruce Barry," continued Janice. "He is innocent. I know you said so before. But I want you to be sure of it. If you have any doubts dismiss them. He isn't the bank robber."

"How do you know?" Marigold asked, caught at once into tense interest.

She had come to walk the river path while she thought out the problem confronting her. Jasper Cole had told her flatly that Barry's alibi had failed and that he expected her to change her positive testimony. She was greatly troubled, for she did not want on her soul the sin of bearing false evidence. Yet how could she send this blue-eyed youth to prison?

Janice explained: "I was coming down town from my house when the robber swung the corner so close to me that his horse was startled and fell. The man was stunned. I ran to him, not knowing of the robbery, and I helped him rise. This Barry boy isn't the man. He is younger. I'm quite sure of it."

The girl caught her hands together impulsively. This was help sent down to her from heaven. She could give testimony in favor of Barry now with a clear conscience.

"You'll say so—to-morrow—in court," Marigold cried.

"No. Not unless absolutely necessary. There are reasons which I cannot give you."

"But—surely if you know he's innocent——"

"I'll be there. If I must I'll speak. But if you'll be positive I won't have to. The other witnesses will support you. There is one thing, though." Janice hesitated before she added: "I must ask you to say nothing at all to your father about my interference."

"Father wants him convicted," the girl said. "He's turned against him."

"I know. Have you courage to stand out?"

The sheriff's daughter nodded. There had come a look into her face that Janice understood. Marigold had a will of her own.

Janice bowed and continued along the river path. She had said all that was necessary. Any more would be surplusage.

She left Marigold a prey to varied emotions. The first was a great relief. She did not doubt Janice Gregg at all. Bruce Barry was innocent. It was good to know that.

Her thoughts came back to the woman. Of course she was bad, but—but——

She found herself full of wonder. How could a woman so lovely be so lost as they said this Mrs. Gregg was? Her soft, velvety voice, every gracious gesture, proclaimed that she was a lady. How much more she looked the part than Mrs. Harden, say! Why, a princess out of a fairy tale could not be more wonderful than this.

The effect that Janice produced on Marigold was no unusual one. She was a bundle of contradictions, a series of paradoxes startlingly disturbing. None like her had before been seen on the raw frontier. Evidently she came from a good family and had been educated at a first-class school. Her fingers evoked from the piano amazing music, technically skillful, emotionally intense. Most fastidious in dress and personal habits, she had been known to wave aside the croupier at the Silver Palace and run the wheel while sweaty miners, unwashed Mexicans, and rough cowboys crowded around the table. Long ago she had turned her back upon the social conventions and become déclassée. Some strange urge had set her small, well-shod feet to follow wild and perilous paths.

Whether that impulse had come from within or had been born of an unhappy love experience no man knew. She had come from nowhere, out of a buried past.

Never did she make the slightest reference to any event precedent to her present mode of life.

There are those who by force of charm or character establish an immunity from destructive criticism regardless of their actions. This was true of Janice Gregg among the men who knew her. To good women she was a lost creature, more to be condemned because of her intelligence, beauty, and refinement. It was impossible for them to keep their affronted eyes from her as she walked down the street with the rhythmic lightness that made her movements remarkable. They would have resented her less if she had been abashed, if she had not been so perfectly poised, so quietly unconscious of the fact that she was a magnet for the looks of all who saw her.

Men treated her always with great respect. This was an expression of the feeling she imposed upon them. Some strange quality of fastidiousness in her set the bounds of men's admiration. Her gay sphinxlike smile invited but repulsed. Those watching her knew that no good woman in Bonanza was more out of their reach than Janice Gregg. Their eyes might talk. Their tongues must be dumb.

She had, too, the open heart, the quick generosity, loved by the frontier. More than one mover had come to Bonanza in a covered wagon, his horses gaunt, his family starving, to find his needs relieved by this soft-eyed outcast. Miners walked the streets who adored her

because when they had been ill or hurt she and Rebecca had nursed them back to health.

A strange woman, Janice Gregg! Small wonder Marigold Cole had to fight against a rush of admiration for her. She was like nobody Marigold had ever known, no more like the common women in her father's dance hall than she was akin to Mrs. Harden or Mrs. Manderson.

Marigold walked the river path a different girl. This Bruce Barry was not a criminal. Judge Harden would have to free him. Her heart sang. She did not know why.

Out of the dusk an old man limped toward her. "Might I have a word with you, Miss Marigold?" he asked.

"Why, yes, Mr. McCoy. That *is* your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, miss."

His mouth twitched. Marigold had an impression that he was suppressing strong emotion. Of course that must be absurd. Why should he have any at the present moment to conceal?

"It's about this young fellow Barry," he began.

Her big eyes dilated. "What about him? He's innocent. I'm sure he is," she cried.

"Are you aimin' to say that to Judge Harden tomorrow?"

"Of course. Why do you ask? What's it to you, Mr. McCoy?"

"I'm his friend. Leastways I'm as close to one as he's got here."

"Tell him not to be afraid of what I'll say. I know he didn't do it. I want him to get out."

"Jas Cole don't want him to get out. Have you figured on that?" the old man asked bluntly.

"My father won't want me to do anything that isn't right," she lied loyally. "He thinks this Barry boy guilty, so of course he wants him punished."

"But you're allowin' to stand pat on what you said before. We can bank on that, can we?"

"Yes."

The old man looked at her hungrily, his washed-out blue eyes quick with life. He did not know how ill fitting was the gingham dress she had stitched herself, how awkward were the movements of her self-conscious body. She was to him something beautiful and precious, and the vision that saw her so was no doubt a truer one than the general opinion which held her a gangling youth all angles, informed by a spirit of resentful sullenness.

"I knew yore mother when she was a girl," he said gently.

"You knew Mother," she echoed. "Where?"

"At Sidney, Nebraska."

"Tell me about her. I didn't know she had ever lived there. She didn't talk about herself much. I've always thought she must have been very pretty when she was young. Her eyes were so lovely."

He cleared his throat before he spoke. Again she had

that odd impression of emotion rising in him to the surface. His voice shook a little. Old folks were quavery like that, she reflected. It was due to physical weakness probably.

"Yore eyes are mighty like hers were. I . . . I usta think her eyes the prettiest I ever see. An' yore hair—same color as hers an' kinda ripplin'. You surely favor her a heap."

"I'm so glad you think so. It's funny, too. I've got a tintype of her when she was eighteen an' it's just lovely. You wouldn't expect two people to look alike when one's beautiful an' the other's ugly."

"You're not ugly. You're gonna be as pretty as she was," he denied flatly.

Cinderella's amazed eyes opened to the widest. The one thing she had known about herself all her life was that she was an ugly duckling. That did not admit of any argument.

"No use talkin' thataway," she reproved. "I ain't a plumb fool."

He stuck doggedly to his guns. "You wait an' you'll see."

"Did you know her real well? Did you like her?" she asked, passing to a subject less ridiculous.

Once more he labored to get some impediment out of his throat before he answered: "I knew her real well . . . onct." Abruptly he broke to another subject. "That lady I jest saw with you—was it Miz Gregg?"

"Yes."

"You know her? She's a friend of yores?"

"No. I never met her before. Why?" She flung out her question defiantly.

"Because." He searched for the proper way to put his admonition. "She's not the kind of lady you ought to know."

"What kind ought I to know?"

"Don't you git mad, Miss Marigold. I'm an old stove-up donker, but I'm speakin' for yore good. Pick yore friends among nice church-going folks."

"You mean the kind that will hardly speak to me," she challenged.

"Why won't they speak to you?"

"Oh, they'll speak to me—an' that's all. Don't you know why they won't? I'm Jasper Cole's daughter—an' he runs the Silver Palace."

His wrinkled old face showed bewilderment. "Are you tellin' me that nice folks are mean to a good girl like you?"

"It's because they are nice an' don't want to be . . . soiled." She spoke with a bitterness no girl of her age should have known. "Don't you read yore Bible, Mr. McCoy? It says how the sins of the fathers are visited on their children. You wouldn't want folks not to live by the Bible, would you?"

"But you ain't his daughter." The protest burst from his lips as though driven out by some inner urge.

She looked at him, astonished. "What d'you mean not his daughter?"

"I mean——"

He stuck, searching for an explanation. When he found one it was lame enough. "I mean you ain't like him. You're like yore mother."

"I ain't read in *my* Bible." she answered with passionate resentment, "that the sins ain't visited if you're like yore mother."

As to that he had no comfort to offer. The news that she was an outcast shocked him. It had not occurred to him that she was not taken in by the other girls and welcomed to their homes.

"You be good an' I reckon it'll work out fine," he said.

"Yes, that's a great comfort," she said ironically. "An' I'll get my reward in heaven."

"Sho! You hadn't ought to talk thataway," he reproved. Her unhappiness was very disturbing to him. He knew that pious sentiments would not alter the harsh facts.

On her way home Marigold wondered about the little man. She knew that she had worried him, though she could not understand what interest he could have in her. As far as she knew they had never met before except to pass each other on the street. He was a queer old man, of no importance. Yet, somehow, it comforted her to know that he was concerned about her. She

could not think of anybody else in the world that was.

And he had known her mother. Yet, when she had pressed him, he seemed to be very hazy about the facts and had told her he had got to go see a man. Somehow she knew he was her friend, and any friend was better than none.

CHAPTER X

Clay Spreads His Cards

As THE preliminary hearing of Clay Ballard, alias Bruce Barry, drew to a close the two most surprised men in the courtroom were the prisoner and the sheriff. Unaccountably the witnesses failed to come through for the prosecution. Cole himself identified Barry positively as the bank robber. The teller thought he was the man, but was not quite ready to take oath to it. Two of the other men veered toward that impression. But Manderson, Flannigan, the clerk at Farrell's, and Marigold Cole not only failed to identify the cowboy as the bandit but said flatly that he was not the man.

There was nothing for Judge Harden to do but dismiss the case and the prisoner. Clay Ballard walked out of the room a free man. Sheriff Cole intercepted him at the door.

"I'm not through with you, young fellow," the officer said in a low voice, his black brows meeting in a heavy frown.

The answer of the released prisoner surprised Cole. The young fellow's blue eyes looked steadily, unwinkingly, into those of the older man.

"An' I'm not through with *you*, Mr. Cole," he returned, very evenly and quietly.

"What d'you mean by that?" demanded the sheriff.

"I'll ask you that question first."

"I'll answer it. My opinion is, though you flimflammed the witnesses, that you're an outlaw and a criminal."

"Exactly what I think of you."

"What!" Cole's voice was a low growl of menacing rage. He was astonished beyond measure.

"You heard me." The hard blue eyes of Ballard did not yield a thousandth part of an inch. "You've rubbed out a dozen men, they say. If we were alone you'd kill me now. But I'm unarmed, an' you can't get by with it before witnesses. I know you like a cowman would a lame bronc's trail. You're the kind of killer that's lookin' for the breaks every time."

If somebody had dropped a bomb on the floor it could have created scarcely more consternation than this charge. It was a challenge, straight from the shoulder, to the most redoubtable gunman in the state, and it came out of the mouth of a smooth-cheeked boy whom none of them had ever heard of prior to his arrest. In a tense silence those crowded about the two waited for the answer. This was fighting talk.

"Go heel yourself," Cole snarled.

"You're the big auger here by yore way of it. You deal cards from a stacked deck an' it goes because you're

Jasper Cole, killer. Listen. I'm callin' yore bluff. I'll spread my cards. If you want to know my real name it's Clay Ballard. I'm a son of Curt Ballard, the man you paid Cash Schmitt to murder in the Baker River country."

The sheriff was pallid with rage. His face never had much color in it, but now even the thin lips were bloodless. "That's a lie. Curt Ballard was a rustler, and he was shot by one of his own crowd——"

Cole got no further. The back of Clay Ballard's open hand struck him hard in the mouth. "Don't say my father was a rustler, you dirty killer."

A woman in the background, standing on a chair to see, gave a scream of terror. Rigid with outraged amazement, Cole was for once slow on the draw. Ben Lyons and De Castro hurled themselves at him. They were in time, with no margin of even a fraction of a second to spare. Lyons caught the wrist above the six-shooter and forced it toward the floor while De Castro's shoulder plowed into the sheriff's chest and flung him off balance. The cowboy Freckles, McCoy, and Dr. Hayes seized Clay and dragged him from the room. The young man could hear Cole's roar of fury as the sheriff fought to escape those holding him. From his point of view he had been insulted grossly. He wanted to get at this insolent youth now, to blot him instantly from life. Within him surged an imperative lust to kill.

Clay's rescuers hurried him along the street.

"What's eatin' you, fellow?" shrilled McCoy ex-

citedly. "Ain't you got any sense a-tall? Might as well spit in a wolf's face as treat Jas Cole thataway."

"Get out of town quick as you can find a horse," advised Dr. Hayes.

"An' keep a-hittin' the high spots," added Freckles. "Me, I wouldn't quit this side of Denver."

"Whyfor did you have to tell him who you were? An' claim he had yore father murdered?" old McCoy wailed. "You're sure the champeen fuss picker. We better get over to the JA corral an' round you up a bronc. The sooner the quicker."

"I've got a horse of my own here," Clay said in a low, even drawl. "I'll use it when I'm good an' ready. But not now, gents. I've got business keepin' me in Bonanza."

"Don't fool yoreself, fellow," the freckled cowboy answered. "This Cole man is sudden death with a gun. You're lucky he didn't get you right there in the courtroom."

"Maybe I'll be lucky again. Someone lend me a gun till I get my own back from De Castro."

The cowboy accommodated Clay. "It shoots a leetle mite high, but it's a right reliable old tried an' true. Get yore own gun soon as you can. I'd hate to lose this partic'lar .44, an' Cole is liable to keep it after—hm!—after the show is over."

"You've got me all planted in Boot Hill already," Clay said grimly. "I've got different notions."

They talked to him, all three at once, seriously and plainly. The purport of what they said was that Jasper Cole was the quickest, surest gunman ever known in the state and that he would let no grass grow before he started operations. They might as well have lectured a stone wall.

Clay thanked them, admitted he was an obstinate guy, and left them to get a room at the Longhorn Hotel. The jury of Public Opinion sat on the porch and watched this long-bodied youth come lightly down the walk. Already they were discussing what had taken place. The eyes of the old fellows rested on him. The talk had died away. They were awaiting developments.

"Like to get a room here for a few days," Clay said.

"You don't want any room here," Jimmie May replied bluntly.

"Thought I did. I've been stayin' at Joe De Castro's hotel, but I've decided to move."

"Move's right. An' keep on movin', young fellow," someone chirped up.

"That's whatever."

"An' no foolin' before you get started, either," a fourth member of the jury added.

Clay looked coolly from one to another. "Whyfor? Bonanza's a good town, I've heard. My notion is to stick around for a while."

"Bad medicine," differed Jimmie May. "Course I hate to turn away trade, but——"

"Like to get an upstairs room if you've got one," the young man continued imperturbably.

"I've got one. That ain't the point."

"No? What is the point?"

"Point is if you stay in Bonanza Jas Cole will get you mighty quick."

"I'm stayin' at my own risk."

"It won't be any risk. It'll be a dead certainty. I'm going outa my way to tell you so, young fellow."

"Much obliged. An' now how about the room?"

Jimmie May upheaved his two hundred and thirty pounds from a rocker. What was the use of arguing with a fellow like this?

"All right," he sighed. "It's yore say-so. Better leave me yore folks' address—in case anything happens."

Young Ballard laughed harshly. "Cole sure has this burg buffaloed."

CHAPTER XI

Advice Goes Begging

THE landlord of the Longhorn Hotel puffed into a bedroom followed by the obstinate guest. Jimmie May extended his hands in a gesture of whimsical despair after one glance at the frowzy bed.

"Charley mostly gives these rooms a lick an' a promise," he apologized. "I pay the chink good money, an' he ain't got a thing on his mind but to soft-foot down to the Silver Palace to buck the tiger. I reckon I got to throw him out on his ear."

It was a threat he had been amiably making for three years. Charley suited him very well.

Clay examined the door and found the key to the lock missing. "I'd like to be able to lock my door," he said.

"Sho! Nobody ever locks their doors here. This community is honest." May sat down on the bed to get a little much-needed rest. It was his theory that a man lived longer if he did not let himself get tired. The bed creaked protestingly at his weight but did not collapse.

"I'm not denyin' its honesty, but I'd like to be able to lock my door," Clay repeated.

The fat man found a certain significance in the look

that accompanied the statement. "Well, I got plenty of keys somewheres. I'll have Charley find you one."

"Much obliged."

May harked back to the remark his guest had made as they were coming in from the porch. "Maybeso Jas has got us buffaloed, like you claim. Lemme tell you one thing, young fellow. He's educated every which way from the ace when it comes to gun play. Any guy who wants personal proof don't most generally stay with us long enough to rue it."

"What's the idea of choosin' for yore sheriff a killer an' a man that runs a hog ranch*?"

"I dunno. Why ain't a cheese blue? Why don't a cat bark? You're one of these lads that has got to know—full of whyfors as a porcupine is of bristles. Jas will go through from hell to breakfast. No bad man will run this town while he's sheriff. Maybe that's the reason."

"No other bad man," Clay corrected.

"Boy, that's no way to talk about him. If you knew sic' 'em you'd fork a bronc an' hive off to parts unknown."

"Or he'll rub me out, like he's done plenty of others, includin' my father?"

The hotel keeper lifted a plump hand in protest. "Get me right. I'm not justifyin' Jas an' I'm not criticizin' him. Fact is, I reckon, that guns are going out an' little red schoolhouses are comin' in. A guy can't any

*The term hog ranch had a local and specific meaning.

longer claim he's not dressed if he's not totin' a big six-gun. We're gettin' real civilized out here. Well, Jas carries over from the old days, as you might say. He's sure got an itchin' trigger finger. We'll say all his killings haven't been necessary. It's kinda a peculiarity of his that he's got to kill every so often."

"You're going a long way round to keep from calling him a plain murderer," Clay said bluntly.

"Sho! Keep yore shirt on, boy. I'm tryin' to explain him to you, an' you keep gettin' on the prod. You've seen these here love affairs, irregular an' improper, but sorta accepted by the folks around. Well, it's thataway with Jas an' his six-shooter. We talk an' kick about him, but mostly he kills bad men an' we let it ride."

"Instead of hangin' him to a telegraph pole, like you should."

Jimmie May adjusted the pillows to fit his back. "Onct he was arrested, but nothin' came of it. Fact is, Jas is too much the gentleman to talk about hanging or puttin' in the pen. Now, honest, did you ever see anyone more courteous an' dignified than him?"

"What's that got to do with it? He's a killer. You don't deny that, do you?"

The man on the bed wheezed out not a denial but an interpretation. "He's what you might call an institution, Jas is. Come right down to it, an' this town is kinda proud to have here a gun artist like Jas. You can't find the beat of him in the whole West."

"I reckon I ought to be pleassed that he tried to kill me instead of arrestin' me," Clay jeered.

"I ain't passin' judgment on the facts, like I done told you already. Folks differ as to the number Jas has killed. Maybe fifteen, maybe twenty. Jas himself is close mouthed. He lives under his hat, an' he never talks about any fracas he's had. But any man who has killed that many has probably blazed away when it may not have been strictly called for. He's a mark not only for enemies but for any ambitious gunman who wants to make a rep quick. So naturally he don't take chances. When in doubt, he kills."

"Without waitin' for the other fellow to get in action, eh?"

May hesitated, then nodded. "I've known three-four times when the other guy didn't have a dead man's chance. I'm tellin' you this on the quiet, son, because I hate to see a right limber lad like you bumped off. Say the word an' I'll have a horse brought round to the back door an' you can light out for where you come from."

"I'll take this room an' pay for the first week."

"All right. All right. A kick's as good as a wink to a blind horse. It'll be three dollars an' four bits with board, but you can pay when you leave."

Jimmie May returned to the forum where Public Opinion was sitting. "He's got me stumped, that lad," he said as he eased himself down into an armchair. "I

ain't made up my mind whether he's a plumb idjit, a big wind puddin', or a fightin' fool."

"We're liable to find out soon, don't you reckon?" the county clerk suggested, reaching into his hip pocket for a plug of tobacco.

"Why, yes, he's called for a showdown an' he's liable to get it," the landlord agreed. "Well, I haven't got the figure for real rapid travel, but if I was in his shoes right now I'd sure be trying to bust the record between here an' somewheres else nowhere contiguous to this neighborhood, as you might say."

Half an hour later Joe de Castro drifted to the hotel. He spoke to one and another of those on the porch, then cocked an eyebrow toward the house. He chanced to be looking at Jimmie May at the moment. The landlord followed him inside.

"Like to see yore star boarder a minute, Jimmie," he said.

The fat man asked no questions. "Room 14," he said.

Joe went upstairs and knocked at the door of the room numbered 14.

"Yes?" a voice inside inquired.

"It's me. Joe de Castro. Got something here belongs to you."

"You alone?"

"Yes."

The door was thrown open. "Come in," Clay invited.

He closed and locked the door after the deputy had entered.

From under his coat De Castro brought a revolver. "I thought you might need this."

It was Clay's own gun. He broke and examined the weapon. It was loaded.

"This been in yore own hands all the time, Mr. De Castro?"

"In my desk—yes."

Clay's smile was disarmingly friendly. "No offense meant, but this may be life an' death to me. Someone might have got at these cartridges while the gun was in yore desk. I reckon I'll get new ones."

"I figured you might feel so about it an' I brought you a box of shells not opened." The deputy produced the cartridges.

"Didn't overlook a bet, did you? I'm sure much obliged."

"I'm doggoned if I know why I did it," grumbled De Castro. "I'm s'posed to be Jas Cole's deputy, an' here I am throwing in with a guy who has declared war on him. Some folks would say that wasn't on the level, an' maybe at that it ain't."

"You know better than that, Joe," the former prisoner answered. "You've been hired for legal business, not to support Cole's private feuds an' help him assassinate innocent men."

"If you're so innocent you got no business insultin'

Jas. About the only fellows I ever knew who had any license to call for a showdown with our esteemed sheriff was Wild Bill Hickok or maybe some of them Dodge City gunmen like Ben Thompson or Mysterious Dave Mather, an accordin' to my observation they weren't anyways innocent."

"Cole made a remark about my father, whom he had murdered, that nobody can get away with in my presence. I don't claim to be a gunman, but I'm not gonna be a brush rabbit, either."

"Like everyone else, I'm chock-full of advice that don't cost you a cent. I won't tell you to light out because I see you're too mulish. So I say lay for him an' fill him full of lead before he knows you're on the premises. Far as the law goes you'd get by. Jas has been so careless in his killings that folks would feel he had it comin'."

Clay shook his head. "Can't do it. That's what he deserves, but I'm not a killer. I'll have to take what fighting chance I've got."

"Which will be none. He'll set the stage to suit him, an' you'll walk on for the sacrifice. I've watched Jas for quite some years. I don't say he's not game, but I do say he don't aim to take onnecessary chances. Most always he gets the breaks."

"You certainly give him a good name."

"I don't claim to like him. He's my boss, but some of his ways sure don't suit me." De Castro rose to go.

"I'm much obliged to you for yore kindness. I've got a .44 here belongin' to that cowboy they call Freckles. Would you mind giving it to him? Well, if you've got to go, so long."

The deputy said adios and departed.

CHAPTER XII

A Rendezvous

CLAY looked down at the beautifully written note, still flushed by the excitement it had aroused in him. His first reaction had been one of glad triumph. She held him in her mind. She wanted to see him—had asked him to come. The assurance of her interest sent a glow pulsing through his veins.

But with sober second thoughts came doubts. It might be a plant, a death trap prepared by Jasper Cole for his unwary feet. Not half an hour ago Joe de Castro had warned him that the man would set the scene for the killing. Was this the bait to lure him?

His nostrils drew in from the paper a faint, delicate perfume. The stationery was a good linen, of a quality that probably could not be bought in Bonanza. But this was unimportant. The paper had come from the desk of Janice Gregg. He knew that, since he had already seen a sheet of it. Moreover, there could be no question of the writing. Once before he had seen it, a firm, regular script expressing character. In some vague way it seemed to him to express the personality of Mrs. Gregg.

The question was whether she could have written at

the dictation of Cole. Instantly he rejected this supposition. He had observed her in the courtroom, aloof but interested, a little ironic smile twitching at her lips. She might be what gossip said she was, but he would stake his life on it that she was no traitor.

There was another possibility. His name was nowhere mentioned. She might have written the note to Cole himself. What a diabolic revenge for the man to use her invitation to a rendezvous to trap the victim he wanted to destroy!

Even while Clay's mind swept over the situation and balanced the chances he knew that he intended to go. In the school of experience he had learned coolness and self-control, but at heart he was an adventurer like all his family. It was in the blood, this wild strain that turned away from the tame commonplace to answer the call of peril. The scent of danger in his nostrils was like a trumpet call to battle.

But he did not intend to play the blundering fool. Jimmie May had told him the note had been brought by a colored boy. Clay would have been better satisfied if he could have seen and talked with the messenger himself. He could not do that now, but he could take precautions against being ambushed. The note set eight o'clock as the time for him to call. He made up his mind to be on the ground a good deal earlier. If Jasper Cole was preparing a trap it might be wise to see the man make his arrangements.

Just before he was ready to set out he drew Jimmie May to one side. He grinned at the fat landlord, to draw the sting from his first remark.

"You can live under yore own hat, I reckon. Don't blab all you know, Mr. May?"

"If you've got any deep, dark past, young fellow, you can keep it to yore own self an' then you won't worry about me talkin'," May sputtered indignantly.

"I want to talk about my deep, dark future, but I don't want to advertise it in the *Nugget*. Strictly confidential, you understand. How do I get from here to Mrs. Gregg's house?"

"Hmp! That's who you got the billy doo from, was it?"

"You may have three guesses an' answer them all yore own self."

"It don't take me three guesses to know you're a gone goose if you go foolin' around that lady. Stay away."

"Much obliged. An' now how do I get to her house by some trail as far from Main Street as possible?"

"You look to me like you'll be duck soup for Jas Cole. None of my business, though. Follow this little draw back of the house an' go clear round the hill. That'll bring you back to a clutter of outbuildings. Go right along the slope past them about a hundred yards to the next house. That's where Miz Gregg lives. There's a picket fence around the garden."

"Flowers in the garden?"

"Y'betcha. Marigolds an' phlox an' what not."

"Well, I just want to go an' pick a few flowers for my room."

May snorted. He got quite a lift out of this debonair youth, but he would not admit it for the world.

"The only flowers you'll need will be lilies to decorate the coffin with," the fat man retorted.

"Not feelin' sick, are you?" Clay asked with manifest sympathy.

"No, sirree. You're the sick man. What you need right now is a brain doctor to examine yore fool haid."

Clay found the directions given him by the landlord easy enough to follow. He sauntered up the draw and around the hill. Once he stopped to fire into the post of a barbed wire fence. He wanted to make sure his revolver had not been tampered with.

It was still pretty light. May's "clutter of outbuildings" were as prominent in the landscape, after he had rounded the hill, as a strip of white cotton on a sore thumb. The picket fence was just beyond at the foot of the hill slope. A ribbon of road wound up a cañon on the other side of the house.

Clay slipped down cautiously to the fence and crouched behind it. The only house in sight was this one. Unless someone came down the hill behind him there was no way of approach his eyes could not cover without even turning his head. It would be too much to

say that he was a man at ease. Nobody who has been marked for death by a notorious killer could be comfortable in mind. But this young range rider gave a pretty good imitation of contentment. His slim, well-muscled body lay motionless. Only the keen, restless eyes, stabbing here, there, and everywhere, showed the tension under which he was.

Clay had been there perhaps twenty minutes when a fat middle-aged colored woman opened the back door of the house and came into the garden. She carried with her a pan of dishwater which she threw over a bed of carrots. This done, she stood with arms akimbo facing the fence behind which the young man lay.

He was not sure whether she saw him until her rich voice rolled out a challenge. "What you doin' back o' that fence, man?"

Clay rose, vaulted the pickets, and came toward her. "I was enjoying yore garden."

"Well, you run right along, Mr. Man, an' enjoy it from somewheres else. We don't have any truck with scalawags hangin' around thataway."

"Mrs. Gregg asked me to call."

"Hmp! Did she ask you to sneak up an' hide?"

"I'm not popular with a friend of hers. So I wanted to make sure he wasn't here."

"Who you-all talkin' about?"

"About Mr. Cole. He isn't inside, is he?"

"No, sir. He ain't. Nobody inside but Miz Gregg.

She'm lookin' for you, I reckon." Her next remark, supposed to be under the breath, was quite audible. She was leading the way to the house, and it came to him over her shoulder. "Beats all what no-'count trash she picks up."

"I've been meanin' to tell you, Rebecca, ever since you brought me that dinner to the jail that you're the best cook west of the Missou." He slipped a dollar into her hand.

Rebecca grunted. She meant him to understand that while a dollar is a dollar and not to be despised she had no apologies to make.

Her mistress received him more graciously. She was playing the piano, but she stopped at once to come forward and offer her hand.

The flow and rhythm of her movements as she advanced, the flash of soft eyes darting into his, filled his veins again with the sense of meeting an exciting, arresting personality.

"I wasn't sure you would come," she said as her soft palm buried itself in his strong brown one.

"You knew I would," he answered.

Small even teeth gleamed from between the ripe lips in a smile adorable and provocative. "Yes, I knew you would," she admitted.

Clay was aware of a curious self-contradiction in himself. At the touch of her hand, the impact of the look from her deep violet eyes in his, fire flamed up like tow

in him. It was as though an electric current had been switched on. His whole being became instantly vital. Yet, simultaneously, he felt an odd hardening of the will in opposition. It was perhaps a protest of the manhood in him against so sudden a surrender to an emotion beyond his control.

"If only to thank you for yore kindness to a poor prisoner," he said.

Was there a faint mocking humor in her smile? "Mere politeness," she agreed. "Well, I should be grateful for any reason."

"I know when I'm being joshed," he told her. "But you can't laugh my gratitude away, ma'am. I'll never quit thankin' you for the good heart that sent such a dinner to me. I had no claim on you. I knew that. I've got none now, though you've been good enough to send for me."

"But you have a claim on me," she said quietly.

He shook his head. "I don't know what it is."

Her glance swept the bronzed face and the long lines of his body. "You do look like him."

"Like who? The bank robber, do you mean? Did you see him?"

"Yes. He's a friend of mine. He spent the night after the holdup here."

"Here! You mean—here?" His gaze was fixed incredulously on her. "In this house?"

"Wasn't that proper?" she asked, a delicate eyebrow

lifting in an unexpected quirk. "With Rebecca here to chaperon us?"

"I'm not worried about how proper it was."

Amusement twitched at the corner of her mouth. "It's sweet of you to have such confidence in my discretion."

"I didn't mention yore discretion."

"It's so much nicer of you to take it for granted," she murmured.

"This holdup stayed right here while Cole was combin' the hills for him?"

She nodded. "We tried to make him comfortable."

The young man laughed. "That's one on Cole, I'd say."

"It was rather one on him, wasn't it?" Her whole face warmed to sudden laughter. "I'd love to tell him, but I'd never dare."

"This holdup fellow was a friend of yores, was he?"

"Perhaps you think I ought not to have bank robbers for friends." She looked dubiously at him, as though struck by an afterthought. "You're not one, are you?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not."

"Then it would be all right for me to let you sit down. Won't you take that chair?" She relieved him of his hat and dropped it on a stool. "I'll not ask you to risk your reputation by staying too long, even with Rebecca here to protect you and it."

He grinned. "Go right on joshin' me, ma'am, if it

amuses you any. I don't reckon my rep in this town is ace high. Far as Rebecca goes, she's told me already where I stand with her."

"So you've made an impression on her susceptible heart."

"No-'count trash was what she called me, an' she doesn't understand why you pick up such riff-raff. I don't myself."

"Are you riff-raff?"

"No. How about this outlaw?"

"My friend the outlaw?" She mused, her deep eyes full of changing lights. "No, he's not that, whatever else he is."

"Don't you know it was dangerous for you to have him here?"

"Very. So good looking, and he had a way with him."

He brushed aside her foolery. "You know what I mean."

"If you come to that it's dangerous to have you here."

"I know it. I must go." He rose abruptly.

She was leaning back indolently in her chair, and she made not the slightest motion to stop him. But her disturbing eyes met his. Clay felt again that odd effect of being swept from his feet into deep waters.

He took two strides toward her and pulled up. The blood was pounding in his veins.

With one sinuous motion, all grace, she had got to her feet and was confronting him.

"No," she cried in a low voice, bell-like in its clearness. "Not you, too. I didn't bring you here for that." He felt the throb of passionate self-scorn in her words. "I have something to tell you."

"And I have something to tell *you*," he answered, his words throaty with feeling.

"You have nothing to tell me—nothing—nothing." She flung out her denial fiercely. "I won't have it. You're a boy. Go away and forget—that foolishness."

"It's too late. I can't forget it. I don't want to."

"You must. I won't have it any other way."

"How can you help it—when I can't help myself? It's got to be the way it is. An' I'm glad of it."

He held out his strong, brown, unscarred hands. She drew back.

The eyes that spoke to him out of soft shadows were as appealing in their wistfulness as the voice. "No, boy, I'm not going to destroy you, too. I brought you here to save you."

"What d'you mean destroy me?"

"There's something in me that's—fatal. It brings death to men who love me. I'm like a poison."

Hungrily his eyes fed on the soft and shining oval of her face, the lips of scarlet, the fine color beating into the satiny cheeks. He found himself unable to control a trembling of the body. What did the cost matter if the rare wonder of her loveliness could be his?

She was in his arms, and the fragrance of her mounted

to his nostrils. He felt love pouring through him. For a long moment her lips, hot and passionate, clung to his. Then she thrust him fiercely from her and flung herself face down on the sofa. She began to sob, wildly, with abandon, so that her slender body was shaken convulsively.

Amazement held him fast. He stared down at her, unable to understand what had so instantly transformed her. His feet drew him toward the sofa. Then, shyly, awkwardly, his fingers touched her quivering shoulder.

"Don't," he begged. "Don't you. Please."

He made no attempt to put his arm around her by way of comfort. Some instinct told him to keep his distance. Presently the sobs grew less violent. Her hand groped for a handkerchief, and he found the little square of linen and put it in her fingers. She dabbed her eyes with it.

After a time she sat up and smiled at him, a little wanly. "I must look a fright," she said, still wiping away the effects of the storm.

Clay did not think so. She was one of those rare women whom tears do not make ugly.

"I'm such an emotional idiot," she went on. "You'd think I was an actress the way I overplay my scenes. I have been one, and I suppose I can't resist the temptation. I judge you don't know much about women, Mr. Ballard."

"Not much," he admitted. "Was it—was it because of—what I did?"

"Because of what I did—and am," she corrected.

"But you did not do anything. It was all my fault, an' I couldn't help it. Leastways, I—I——"

She flashed one quick look at him, the glance a woman gives to the blundering male who does not understand. It was not necessary for her to explain that he had made love to her because she wished it so even while she did not want him to. Better not let him know that there was some combination of boy and man in him that stirred in her heart complex emotions maternal and not at all maternal.

"You mustn't do that again—ever," she told him.

"You mean you—don't like me?" he gulped out inadequately.

"Yes, I like you very much. There's something about you—never mind, I like you."

"You don't love Jasper Cole?" he asked bluntly.

"Shall we leave Mr. Cole out of it?"

"But if I thought you loved him—— You don't, though. You couldn't. Not a man like that."

"Then that's settled," she smiled.

"Maybe you could get to—like me better. If you saw more of me."

Her eyes grew tender. "Listen, boy. I'm twenty-five. I've lived a thousand years. I've loved—never mind how often. But I'm an old woman."

"You're not," he denied. "There's nobody like you—none that I ever saw."

"Emotionally I'm old, and—I'm shopworn." The color beat into her face, but her eyes held steadily to his. "Why should I blush at saying that to you, since—since it's common talk? If I do, it's because you're a nice clean boy, with all your life to live."

He repudiated her point of view. "I'm a wild buckaroo, ma'am, an' I've been to town quite some to spend my pay. It doesn't matter if you're a little older. One has to be older than the other. What's a year or so, anyhow? Why don't you go away from here with me? We'll start life . . . straight, back where I come from. We'll——"

"Boy, you're talking nonsense. You don't know me. You don't know anything about me. I'm not what you think I am at all." She flung out a hand in a sort of despair. "I don't want any other kind of life than this—not really. I may think for an hour that I do, but—I couldn't be different. I'm what I am. I have a burning devil of unrest in me instead of a soul."

"You haven't told me yet that you—couldn't—love me," he said, his voice shaking.

"What does that matter? I've loved other men—and killed them. I'm not going to hurt you. Go away from me—quick—and forget me."

He stood squarely in front of her, holding her eyes doggedly with his. "I want an answer."

Once more he felt the shock of the smoldering fires in the dilated pupils.

"I'll tell you," she said. "But it won't make any difference. I could love you, dear boy, in my way. But some day after—after the novelty had passed—though I might still love you, I would cruelly wound your love. Because, my dear, I am . . . a light woman." She began to cry again, very softly.

"I don't believe it—not at heart. You haven't met the man."

When she could trust her voice she spoke again. "And so I will not let you love me, because I know myself. And I will not love you—to destroy you."

"But if I'm ready to take the chance?"

"I'm not." She looked straight at him. "Let me tell you something else. If I hurt you I'd kill myself, too. I won't have the ruin of another man on my hands."

"Why do you talk that way? I'm a grown-up he-man. So were those other men that loved you, I reckon. Is it yore fault if they went wild an' got themselves in trouble the way men do?"

Her mobile face mirrored despair. "Yes, it was my fault. I'm like Lorelei. I draw men to destruction. There's something in me that's . . . evil." She held up her hands. "I can't wash the blood off them. So you see, dear boy, I daren't let you love me. Even for my own sake I daren't. Because, if anything happens to anyone again on my account I must not . . . go on living."

"You're morbid," he told her. "You've got a good heart full of kindness. You never meant to harm anyone. If men went crazy about you an' fought, you're not to blame. Say I had to kill a man to save my own life. I wouldn't be a murderer. It wouldn't make me a cold-blooded killer like Cole."

She smiled wanly. "No use arguing about it. I know what I know. We're not responsible only for our intentions but for the effects of what we do."

"Then if you feel that way let me take you clear outa this country. We'll get married an' go to Texas—Arizona—anywhere you like."

Janice shook her head. "Too late for me. I've made my bed."

"Why is it too late? To-morrow's a new day, ain't it?"

"For you, but not for me. I'm made by all the yesterdays I've lived."

"I don't believe it," he persisted doggedly. "You're just a girl—almost one, anyhow—an' you've made slips, I reckon. What of that?"

"Slips!" She smiled, not without some touch of bitterness. "Is that what all the nice good people call it when they whisper about me?"

"It doesn't matter what they say."

"Oh, yes, it does. It matters a lot to a woman. When she's down she's down to stay." Her eyes challenged his steadily. "What *do* they say about me? I'll take your own report of it."

"They say you're a wonderful woman, kind, generous, lovely. They say——"

She put that aside with a little disdainful gesture. "I'm talking about my moral character. What do they say about that?"

He flushed. "I tell you it doesn't matter what they say."

Smiling at him, she shrugged her shoulders. "You see."

She could have made explanations, interpreted herself to him. But she was too proud to do that. After all, what defense would Madam Grundy accept from a woman who had been an actress at a frontier camp variety hall, one around whose name scandals had spread like a prairie wild fire in the wind?

"I am . . . condemned," she said. "Enough of that. I sent for you because you are Clay Ballard."

"I don't get that. Did you know my folks?"

"Only one of them. The man who stayed here the night after the bank robbery was your brother Mitchell."

CHAPTER XIII

A Woman and Two Men

IT WAS characteristic of Janice that though her voice was very gentle she did not try to mitigate the force of the blow by preparing him for it. He was a man and would not want to be treated like an hysterical woman.

Clay stared at her while the words sank in. She could see the muscles of his jaw stand out as he clamped his teeth to meet the import of what she had said.

When at last he spoke his voice was hoarse. "Mitch was the bank robber that got away?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"I was going down town when his horse swung around the corner just below the house. My parasol was up and the horse was frightened. He shied and slipped, throwing the rider as he went down. The horse jumped up and galloped along the cañon road, but the man lay still. I ran to him as he was coming to. I asked him if he was hurt. He rose and looked at me, then took off his hat and bowed. 'Not yet, ma'am, but soon,' he told me. 'My last chance has run off and left me.' Then he told

me that he and two others had just robbed the bank and his companions had been killed. I had no time to think things out. He was good looking and reckless and his plight so desperate that my impulse was to save him. I gave him my ring and told him to show it to Rebecca and to tell her to hide him till I came back. Then I went on to town."

"You kept him hid all that day an' night?"

"Yes. It was easy enough. No other place is in sight except the Jensen stables. He got a horse from the pasture next day and broke the fence to make it look as though the animal had escaped. I think he found an old saddle at the Jensen place."

"An' then he rode away?"

"He rode away."

"You haven't heard from him since, I reckon."

"Yes, I had a little note from him. It came by mail. I'll get it for you."

She went to a writing desk and touched some spring that opened a secret drawer. From this she drew a letter and handed it to Clay.

He recognized the handwriting and his heart grew chill. There could be no mistake. Mitch must be the robber she had saved.

"Want me to read it?" he asked.

She nodded.

The postmark was Salt Springs. The letter had no signature and the body of it consisted of just four lines.

I'll never forget what you did any more than I'll forget what he did. If the Lord would answer my prayers I would ask Him to be good to you. I can't ever pay you back, but I can pay Cole and I sure will.

"What does he mean about payin' back Cole?" Clay asked, frowning at the note. "He knows Cole is sheriff here. He wouldn't ask him to lay down on his job, would he? That don't sound like the Mitch Ballard I usta know. He was wild enough, I admit, but he'd go through without whinin' when the luck broke against him."

"I don't know for sure what he means by that, but he was very bitter at Mr. Cole—called him a traitor but wouldn't tell me why."

"I reckon he was thinkin' back to the time Cole got a hired killer to murder our father."

"Maybe so. I don't know. But when I heard you tell Mr. Cole that your name was Clay Ballard I knew I had to see you and tell you about your brother."

His face slowly flushed. "I heard Mitch was in the—the penitentiary for rustlin'. If that's so, how could he have been here?"

"He told me he was released two months ago. They gave him time off for good behavior."

"First time I ever knew Mitch had any good behavior," young Ballard said bitterly. "It didn't last long, did it, once he was out?"

"Your brother was very frank," Mrs. Gregg said

gently. "He told me he was framed for rustling, though he did not deny he had done plenty of it. But in that particular case they fixed up evidence to convict him. I believe what he said."

"Mitch isn't a liar," his brother said.

There was a knock on the front door—two taps close together, a pause, and then another tap.

The woman looked at her guest, eyes horror filled. "Jasper Cole," she whispered.

Clay's eyes, grown steely, became shining slits between the curtains of his narrowed lids. "You'd better get out the back way," he advised.

"No—no! He mustn't know you're here."

"Might as well be here as later." Voice and manner were both dogged.

"Think of your brother. You've got to live to save him. Think of me if he finds you here. Do you want me to suffer for your obstinacy?"

Again there came the triple knock.

That last argument moved him. "You're right. Hide me if you can."

She led him into a bedroom adjoining the parlor and left him there. As she closed the door behind her he caught a glimpse of a man moving forward from the front door into the room he had just left. Rebecca had admitted him, probably.

In her hurry Janice had not quite closed the door of the bedroom. Clay heard her light, gay voice: "What an

unexpected pleasure! I didn't know I was to see you this evening."

"I'm here because I heard something to-day—less than an hour ago. I've been making investigations. The testimony at the hearing to-day didn't sound right to me. That fellow Boyd, the bank teller, told me you tried to get him to change his testimony. Afterward I saw Manderson and made him tell me the truth. You suborned witnesses to save this bank robber. Why? What is he to you?"

To begin with Cole's voice had been low, though charged with repressed feeling. As he continued his anger broke bounds and his words came hoarsely.

"I'll tell you, Jasper, if you'll sit down and listen quietly. I can explain everything, but you must be reasonable and try to understand."

He did not sit down, but he made an effort to control his rising temper. "I came here to listen. Go on. Are you infatuated with this bandit? Is that it?"

"He's not a bandit, Jasper. I'll tell you how I know, and in order to tell you I have to make a confession. I told you I saw the robber when he was escaping, but I didn't tell you quite everything. His horse was frightened at my parasol and threw him. I thought he was hurt and helped him to get up. Of course I didn't know then he was an outlaw. But I had a very good look at him before he rode away. The man wasn't this Bruce Barry."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because you're so—so hard. I suppose my reason was a foolish woman's one. You had killed his two companions. That seemed enough at one time. I felt sorry for him, and so I didn't say anything. But when I knew this Bruce Barry wasn't the man I couldn't stand by and see him convicted. You wouldn't want me to do that, Jasper."

"I want you to stop meddling with my affairs," he told her harshly. "I want you to mind your own business. Now see what you've done. Because you interfered I've got to kill this fool instead of sending him to the penitentiary."

He strode furiously up and down the room, pacing like a caged tiger. Janice could hear his strong teeth grinding. She knew he was living again the moment when Clay Ballard had slapped his face, and it needed no deep knowledge of the man to be sure he was drinking a cup of bitter humiliation. Nobody had ever before so trodden on his overweening pride.

Anxiously she studied him, as she had often done before. She had told Clay Ballard that there was a devil of unrest inside of her instead of a soul. Surely this was even more true of Jasper Cole. She watched his burning black eyes, glowering menace from the deep sockets, set in a grim rigid face. There was an inexorable look about his straight, thin-lipped mouth. In the man was no mercy, either for himself or for others. To plead with

him for the life of Clay Ballard would be to increase his jealousy.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You mix yourself in my business. You have secrets to defeat me. If you'd told me which road this outlaw took we'd probably have rounded him up. But you have to play your own hand against me, not only with him but with this other young miscreant. There's no loyalty in you."

"Everything I do is wrong, even when I want it to be right," she admitted humbly.

"I don't know now what's in your mind, how much you're trying to deceive me. All I know is that your interference has brought this Ballard into the open and I've got to kill him."

"That's what my friendship always does for men," she said despairingly.

"Your friendship! Do you claim to be a friend of this —this fellow that insulted me?"

Her hand lifted wearily, in a little gesture born of a troubled heart. "Oh, what's the use in quibbling over words? I tried to save him, because he was a boy and innocent. All I've done is to get him marked for death. People ought to shun me like the plague."

"You've got to get into everybody's life. You can't keep out, as any other woman would. And you see what happens."

She could not let it go at that, even though she knew her warning would infuriate him. "If you do this, Jasper, if you kill that boy, it will be the end between you and me."

He glared at her, taken aback. She faced him with a steady courage, a look in her eyes he did not understand.

"What's this man to you?" he demanded.

"Why can't you understand, Jasper?" she asked sadly. "If I destroy this boy I'm not going to live to ruin another. I've—I've done enough harm in the world already."

His black eyes tried to read what was back of the white face and the wistful luminous wells so filled with unhappiness. The man's love for her was destructive in its nature. If offered neither joy nor freedom. None the less he was possessed, in some savage, hungry way, by this enticing personality whose mystery he could not penetrate.

"Don't be a tragic fool," he told her harshly. "If this man is nothing to you, forget him. He's my business. You've nothing to do with him, nor with what becomes of him. I've known for some time he was looking for trouble. Now he's found it."

She turned away, heartsick. What was the use of trying to explain? He was as fixed as Laramie Peak. And, giving up the fight to move him, her heart jumped with fear. For her glance had fallen upon the hat of

Clay Ballard lying in plain view on the stool where she had dropped it.

Her mental and muscular reaction was instantaneous. She sank down upon the stool as though weary and faint, her head drooping against the end of the piano. It was not all pretense. The sight of the hat, evidence of the presence of another man, had given her a shock that unsteadied her.

"What's the matter?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm not well to-night, Jasper. It's been hot—and it disturbs me to quarrel with you. If you'd please leave me to-night I'll talk it all over to-morrow."

He saw that she was pale and trembling. It was no part of his policy to drive her too far. In his way he was in love with her as he had never been with another woman. Her despairing attitude had disarmed his anger even though it had not in the least changed his purpose toward Clay Ballard. Perhaps it would be better to talk the thing over again later when she was not so high strung.

"If you wish it, Janice. Only understand—you mustn't come between me and my enemies. I won't have it."

"No," she promised. Anything to get him out of the house.

"Go to bed and sleep. Don't worry your pretty head about these scalawags. I'll take care of them."

"Yes," she agreed.

He lifted her from the stool into his arms and looked

down into the lovely troubled face. For a moment she lay there, holding his gaze so that it might not lift over her shoulder and fall upon the seat where the crushed hat lay. Then adroitly, with the excuse of nestling closer in his embrace, she shifted her footing in such a way as to make him turn his back to the stool.

Cole said nothing. It was not his habit to pay her compliments, to admit in words how keen edged was his passion for her. He held her warm and supple body close, staring hungrily down at her before he rained savage kisses on eyes and lips and throat. Then he thrust her from him, turned away, caught up his hat, and strode from the room.

CHAPTER XIV

C. B.

JANICE drew a deep breath of relief. For the moment at least she had averted danger. By finesse she had got Cole out of the house with her other guest undiscovered. She picked up the big hat upon which she had been sitting and began to smooth out the wrinkles.

She mustered a faint smile as she modeled it into shape. "It'll never be the same hat again," she murmured.

Without warning the front door opened. Cole stood in the entrance.

"I just wanted to say, Janice, that if you're not well perhaps Dr. Hayes——"

He stopped abruptly. His gaze had found the hat and was riveted upon it.

Janice gave a little despairing moan. Her first impulse was to thrust the hat behind her. She restrained herself. That would be a confession of guilt. Wildly she sought for any explanation that would serve.

The sheriff lifted his eyes from the hat to the woman. They were hard as jade.

"Tell me some more lies, Janice," he said.

"You always distrust me," she cried. "If I told you the truth——"

"It would be a change, anyhow." Hard after this he flung at her a question which was also a threat: "Whose hat is that?"

The tortured woman tried to smile. "When the hold-up man got on his horse he was in such a hurry to escape that he—he forgot his hat."

Cole took three strides toward her. "Give it here."

Tremblingly the hand with the hat went out. The man took it from her. It was a broad-brimmed white Stetson, and upon it was written evidence of much wear under many summer suns. On the sweat band had been printed by hand the two initials C. B.

The sheriff looked at her. "C. B. Standing for what? This outlaw—did he tell you his name?"

"No. You see he was thinking only of getting away from you. He was so nervous that he—didn't wait to pick up his hat."

"So you picked it up and hid it, knowing that the hat would be a clue to identify him. Who was this man? Did you know him? Come clean."

"No, Jasper, I'd never seen him before."

"You're for any stranger against me. Is that it?"

"I'm not against you, Jasper. But—can't I be for the under dog a little bit when the pack is after him to worry out his life?"

"Meaning me when you say the pack."

She ignored that. "I'm made that way, Jasper. I can't help it. Even when I was a tiny girl I was for any stray cur that was homeless, especially if it had a can tied to its tail. My governess told me it wasn't ladylike, but she couldn't reason me out of it." The woman smiled wistfully. "Perhaps it's instinctive. I'm an under dog myself."

Cole looked down at the hat band. "C. B.," he repeated. "C. B. Clay Ballard, by God!" The black beady eyes stabbed a question at her.

Janice had lost her battle to deceive him. She knew that, and the bottom dropped out of her heart. She grew instantly sick with fear. The room began to wave in front of her as her body drooped against the piano. Her hand, reaching for support, closed on a stone Buddha that rested on it.

She saw Clay Ballard in the doorway of the bedroom and heard his cool, steady voice.

"I came to thank Mrs. Gregg for the dinner she sent me."

Cole, wary as a panther, stood watching him. The sheriff's mouth was a thin, cruel line. The slitted eyes beyond the narrowed lids glittered with the menace of the beast of prey crouching for the kill. His body weaved catlike from side to side. Janice wanted to shriek, but the cords of her throat were momentarily paralyzed. She could not utter a sound.

"I'm going to kill you—now," Cole said in a low tone, spacing each word deliberately.

The woman noted the forward thrust of his head, the slow movement of his hand toward the butt of the weapon under the loose long coat.

"Instead of hiring Fred Schmitt to do it?"

Janice felt a shock of surprise at the sound of that cool taunting challenge. It held the ring of confidence, had in it none of the despair of one condemned to death. Her terror-filled gaze swept for an instant to Ballard.

No muscle of his long body moved. Already the brown hand was at his hip, prepared for action. There was no light of fear in the cold blue eyes, hardened to steel, which never wavered from those of his enemy.

That flying glance told Janice that he was a man among ten thousand, competent as well as fearless, perhaps after all a match for Jasper Cole.

Then her eyes went back to the killer, and all her energies came to life. For she knew that within a split second guns would roar. Her left arm flung itself forward and hurled the stone Buddha at Cole. It struck his chin on the point. The man threw up his hands and went down like a bullock hit by a sledge hammer. The .44, already snatched from its scabbard, clattered to the floor. His body rolled over and lay still.

They stared at him, the man and the woman, completely taken by surprise. Then they looked at each other.

"I—I was afraid——"

She stopped, lips and cheeks colorless. No need to say of what she had been afraid.

Clay thrust back into its holster the revolver that had leaped to his hand at the instant his enemy drew. He took charge first of the .44 lying on the floor, after which he knelt down beside the lax figure of the sheriff.

"Have I—killed him?" Janice breathed.

"No. He's knocked out. Better get water."

Rebecca had run into the room. She vanished, to return presently with a towel and a water pitcher.

"Lemme get to him," she ordered.

The young man rose from his knee and walked across to Mrs. Gregg. He spoke in a low voice.

"Very likely you saved my life. Certainly mine or his, one. I never saw anything so quick."

"I didn't even know what I was doing. You're sure I haven't . . . killed him?"

"Yes. The thing hit him near the point of the chin. That's where prize fighters try for knockouts. He'll come to pretty soon."

"You mustn't wait. You must be gone before that."

"An' what would he do to you?"

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm a woman. He wouldn't touch me. But you see now you must go, don't you?"

He knew that he must, if only for a protection to her. For it was clear to him that she not only realized herself a focal point of danger to all who loved her, but was

living in a tragic atmosphere from which death would be the only release if he should become the victim of Cole's rage and she should persuade herself that jealousy had been the determining cause.

"Perhaps," he agreed. "But not without thankin' you first. I heard yore talk with him. How you got Manderson an' other witnesses to change their testimony. You've done more for me than any other woman ever did—except my mother. What can I do for you?"

"Just one thing. You can ride away to some place where Jasper Cole can't reach you. Now. To-night. Before he comes to and can prevent you."

She picked up his hat, then slipped an arm under his to lead him from the room. Outside the back door they stopped. A million stars rode the heavens above.

"You'll get a horse right away and leave town, won't you?" she begged.

"You're sure you won't come to any harm from him on account of what's happened?"

"Quite sure. He never touched a woman in his life.... When will you go?"

"I'll get my horse an' be gone inside of half an hour. Don't you worry about me."

"But I shall. Until you're safe out of town."

He caught her hands in his and held them close to his breast as he looked down into her eyes. "There's still time, dear. Go with me. Ride out into the night with

me underneath the stars. We'll begin again. Both of us. Together. A new life."

She shook her head sadly. "No, dear boy. You'll see some day why that couldn't ever be. I'm near the end of life, and you—you're at the beginning."

"Why do you talk that way? It's ridiculous. There's more life in you than in any woman I ever saw."

"Physically, but—— Well, we're only given a certain reservoir of spirit, and if we burn that out——"

"But if you love me an' I love you——"

"Even that wouldn't be enough to save me. It's too late. It's as I said. I'm burned out. Now go. At once, please."

A wave of emotion crashed through him. He held her warm soft body close to him and kissed the lips that turned to his beneath the stars.

"Now, boy," she whispered.

He held her from him and looked hungrily into her face. The picture that he carried away with him was of deep violet eyes, incomparably alive, pouring love into his.

CHAPTER XV

McCoy Tells a Story

HAVING decided to leave town, Clay lost no time in going. He walked quickly down to the Buffalo Corral to get his horse. In his pocket was an order from Joe de Castro to the owner of the stable for the release of the animal. Ten minutes later Clay dismounted in front of the Longhorn Hotel.

He found Jimmie May and told him he was leaving.

The fat landlord was both relieved and disappointed. He was relieved because he liked this young fellow and did not want to see him killed. But he was sorry Ballard had turned out a four flusher. Evidently Clay had lost his nerve. This was just as well. No sense in him staying to be bumped off by Cole. Still and all, no denying that it was a let-down for him to slap the sheriff, tell him where to get off at, talk big about sticking around, and then sneak off like a cur with his tail between his legs. The boy hadn't ought to have made his brags if he hadn't aimed to stand pat.

May could not resist giving him a dig. "I kinda thought you might go."

"Well, you thought right. How much do I owe you?"

"About six bits, I reckon." May indulged in a grin. "Leavin' any address in case of important mail comin' to you?"

"No address."

"If there's any inquiries, what shall I say?'

"Say I'm gone."

"I advised you to go an' you said——"

"I've changed my mind."

"That's yore privilege."

The landlord watched him ride away. The fat man was still a little puzzled. "He didn't act like he was scared," May said to himself. "When I handed him them digs he didn't pay no attention. Seemed kinda like he had something on his mind more important. Hmp! I dunno anything more important at that than lightin' out before Jas pumps a half a pint o' lead into his hide. But if it had been me, an' I'd been hittin' the trail because I was scared, I reckon to save my face I'd a-give a lot o' reasons why I was vamosin'."

Clay wanted to see Caleb McCoy before he left. The old man had been his friend, and it was only fair to give him at least a partial account of what had taken place. The common talk, of course, would be that he was yellow and had weakened. That was relatively unimportant. Jasper Cole would not share that opinion. He would know that if his enemy had wished to destroy him he had a safe opportunity to do it while he lay defenseless.

The cabin of the old man was in a little gulch just out of town. He had described its location to Clay so that the young man had no difficulty in finding it. As his horse picked a way up the trail he could see a light shining from a window like a beacon in the night.

Clay drew up and dismounted back of a clump of aspens. He dropped the reins to the ground and moved toward the house. But before knocking he half circled the cabin to the window to discover if possible whether the old man was alone. The last thing he desired was to have it get out that he had called on McCoy before leaving town. It might bring trouble down on his friend.

The window was curtained so closely that he could not see into the room. He listened but did not hear any voices. Since the walls were built of logs he probably would not hear anything inside in any case. The ex-buffalo hunter lived a solitary life. It was a ten-to-one bet that he was alone.

Clay walked around to the door and knocked.

There was a moment of silence before McCoy's thin voice answered with a question: "Who's there?"

"Are you alone?" Clay asked.

"Who'd be here but me?" There was a querulous shrillness in the response. "Don't I live alone?"

"It's Clay Ballard," the cowboy replied.

The door was flung open. "Whyn't you say so at first?" McCoy wanted to know. "Scarin' a fellow that-away. Come in, young fellow."

Clay walked in, and his host at once shut and bolted the door. Young Ballard did not need to ask him why. Marigold Cole was in the room, her big brown eyes staring at him. He had apparently interrupted a scene of some sort, for she had manifestly been crying.

"Meet Miss Marigold," the old-timer said. "She's in a li'l' trouble an' come to me for some advice."

Evidently this last was offered as an explanation of her presence.

"I'm right sorry to hear that," Clay said. "I hope it's not on account of the way she testified for me to-day."

"That's just why. But we won't go into that now. What's on yore mind, young fellow?"

Clay did not intend to be dismissed so cavalierly from an affair that concerned him. "The first thing on my mind is that if Miss Marigold is in trouble because she stood by me to-day, why, I've got to know all about it."

McCoy looked at the girl doubtfully. "I dunno as she wants her business talked over before strangers."

"Then you shouldn't have told me as much as you have. Miss Marigold came through all the way for me. Think you can tell me in one breath that she's in trouble because of me, an' in the next that it's none of my business? What kind of a guy do you think I am?"

Marigold flung out a hand in a gesture half defiant. "Tell him. What difference does it make? Everybody will know it soon."

"She has had a break with Cole an' aims to leave his house. She came to me to ask me what to do." Into the little man's eyes there flamed a light that might have been triumph or might have been gladness. "An' I aim to tell her. She don't have to go back."

"He went after you for the way you testified to-day. That what you mean?" Clay asked.

The girl answered reluctantly, her eyes sullen. She was sensitive enough not to want to discuss the subject. After all, Jasper Cole was her father, in spite of what he was and what had taken place between them. She had come to the old buffalo hunter only because there was nobody else to whom she could turn. But what could he do? The law was with her father. She would have to return to his roof.

"He said things—that—that——"

She broke off. How could she tell them that the man, furious at the humiliation given him in open court, resenting her part in his defeat, had in his rage said things about her mother to which she could not listen? How could she explain that wounded by his bitter tongue she had fought back like a trapped animal to defend the memory of the mother she loved, that unforgiveable taunts, stinging like the lash of a whip, had been poured out upon her?

McCoy slammed a trembling fist down on the table. "It don't matter a billy-be-damn what he said. You

kinda hinted some of 'em to me before this boy came. I tell you they ain't true, not the way he makes out. An' what of 'em are true he's responsible for because he's the wolf he is."

"Oh, well." The girl's throat swelled into a little wail. "I'll have to go back to him, anyhow. He'll make me come, like a whipped dog."

"No, sirree. You don't have to go back to him. Not a step of the way. He ain't yore father an' he can't make you do like he says."

"Not my father?" The girl turned astonished eyes on McCoy. "What d'you mean not my father?"

"I mean what I say. Jas Cole ain't yore father."

"How can that be?" She turned white, recalling a phrase Cole had used two hours earlier. "If you're talkin' against my mother, too, I won't have it. You can't—you can't——"

She stopped. It was not possible for her to put into words this thing Jasper Cole had hinted and that perhaps the old buffalo hunter was implying. A lifelong loyalty fought against it. In her young eyes was the flare of feminine ferocity such as may be seen in a wild animal crouched to defend her offspring.

McCoy's defense came from a throat that worked. The Adam's apple bobbed up and down under the loose, wrinkled skin. "I'd ruther cut off a hand than say a word against yore mother. I'm—her father."

"What?" she cried.

"An' yore grandfather." The muscles of his face twitched. He blinked to keep back tears.

"I—don't understand."

"Course not. It's a long story."

"I knew her name was McCoy before she married. Tell me, please—everything."

"You've got a right to know. An' there ain't a thing I'm allowin' to tell you that reflects on her. There never was a better girl than our Jessie, nor a sweeter nor a truer."

"I'd know that even if you didn't say so," Marigold said.

"We had three sons, my wife an' I. Jessie was the only girl. She was the youngest, our baby. Course we all made over her a lot. If she only hadn't grown up. But what's the use of talkin' thataway? A young fellow come along, a likely lad, gay an' friendly. Name of Denny Sullivan. They fell in love with each other right away. Neither her mother nor me had any objections to him. They got married, an' after a while a baby was born. That was you. About then Denny got restless an' wanted to head west. He threw in with a young German named Gus Hoeckel. So they loaded their covered wagons an' started. Denver was where they started for. On the way they met this Jasper Cole. He was a professional gambler. I reckon some folks would have called him good lookin'. Anyhow, he dressed tony

an' was a slick, smooth talker. He joined up with the party."

"Traveled with them?" Marigold asked.

"Yes. Gus told me later that Jessie was against it. She didn't like the way his black eyes kept watchin' her. There's no doubt, by Gus's way of it, that Cole took a fancy to yore mother from the start. He saw it. So did Jessie. Finally yore pappy saw it, too, an' got kinda restless, like he was holdin' in his temper. He didn't like the way Cole acted, an' yet there wasn't anything that he could just put a finger on."

"I know him," Marigold broke in bitterly.

"One day yore pappy an' Cole rode out to kill an antelope for meat. Late that night Cole came back alone an' claimed they'd been attacked by Injuns and Denny had been killed. After a while, when they figured it would be safe, all three of them went out an' found yore pappy's body. They buried him by the trail. Gus noticed that he had been shot in the back of the head from close enough so that powder marks showed. He had his suspicions, but he was a quiet, peaceable fellow not lookin' for trouble. He didn't forget that Cole was dangerous, even then known as a gunman mighty quick on the draw. So he kept his mouth shut."

"Do you mean that he—murdered my father?" Marigold asked, blanched to the lips.

"That's just what I believe," the old man cried with the weak passion of the aged. "But I can't prove it.

Gus told me he didn't see any Injun sign anywhere around. Cole wanted yore mother an' that was the only way he knew to get her."

"But Mother—surely she wouldn't—— Oh, it's horrible!"

"Yore mother was innocent as a baby, an' Cole was a slick proposition, like I done said. He was chock-full of sympathy, the friend always on the job. She was only a girl, and she didn't know a thing about the world. Well, there she was, in a strange town with a two months' old baby, no acquaintances, an' no money left. An' there was Jas Cole, his purse open for her when she needed a loan. I expect he just oozed kindness. What she wanted was to get home to her mammy an' me. Gus was out of work an' busted. She wrote to me an' I sent money. I should have gone straight to Denver, but my wife was mighty sick in her last illness. Jessie never got the money I sent. Maybe Cole saw to it she didn't. The baby got sick, an' there were doctor bills and a lot more expenses pilin' up. Cole footed the bills. She had to take from him money to pay for food an' the roof over her head an' medicines an' the Lord knows what all. What could she do, all alone there, an' Cole pressin' her all the time to marry him?"

"Oh, if she only hadn't," the girl cried.

"I never saw my Jessie again," McCoy went on. "Her mother lingered about five-six months. I couldn't leave her. After I'd buried her I went to Denver. It was

a big town even then. A few folks remembered the Coles, but nobody knew where they'd gone to live. I lost track of yore mother completely, though I advertised for years. Once, a long time later, Gus Hoeckel saw yore mother in Wyoming at a town called Rawlins. He said yore mammy wasn't any more like the Jessie McCoy he'd known than I'm like I was forty years ago. He could see she was scared of Cole, like as if some fear haunted her. Maybe she had guessed by this time what he had done to Denny Sullivan. I don't know. Well, Gus drifted around for years before I met up with him again. Then I headed straight for Rawlins. They had gone again. But Cole was well known by now. I got on their trail an' came to Bonanza. Yore mother had been dead two-three years."

"And you never told me who you were?"

"Maybe I did wrong, but I couldn't tell you without going into yore mammy's unhappy history. I found out from folks that Cole never abused you—seemed to treat you mighty well. I hadn't a bean in the world. So I let things ride, figurin' it would be better thataway."

"But you were wrong. I'm sure you were. Why didn't you take me away from him then? I've always hated it —being his daughter. I've always felt—soiled. An' after you knew how he'd treated Mother, an' that he'd killed my father."

"I didn't know either one for sure," the old man pleaded. "Like I said, I asked folks some questions,

kinda on the quiet, an' the answers I got didn't bear out what Gus had said."

Marigold broke into passionate explanation. "I've always hated him, even when I thought it was wicked. I couldn't help it. And he knew it—and hated me back. Maybe I reminded him of my father and what he had done." There had come a sob into her voice.

Clay spoke for the first time since McCoy had begun to tell the story. He was sorry for Marigold. She was so young, had adventured such a little way into life, and yet had been so tragically buffeted by it.

"He killed my father, too," the young man said in a low voice.

Big eyed, the girl looked at him. "When?"

"About three years ago."

"I never heard of it."

"You wouldn't. Another man pulled the trigger of the gun, but Jasper Cole arranged to have it done." He told her the facts of the case as far as he knew them.

Marigold had been full of herself and her own affairs. Now she came to a startled realization of this young man's peril. "What are you doing here? Why haven't you left town? Don't you know, after what you did to-day in the courtroom, he'll not rest until he has killed you?"

"If he can," Clay corrected.

"But he can. He'll lie in wait for you. He always gets the other man. You must leave town—to-night."

"That's what I aim to do."

"Right away. Because, if he meets you——"

"He's met me since my friends dragged me outa the courthouse."

"He's met you—where?"

"It doesn't matter where. He had good intentions of puttin' another notch on his gun. But someone interfered again."

"Who?"

"A friend of mine. I'd rather this wasn't mentioned. The point is that I hadn't intended to leave town, but I've got to go."

"Of course you've got to go," she said quickly. "Any child could see that, an' you've got to go sudden."

"Something has come up that has made me change my mind. It doesn't matter what it is. I came here to tell Mr. McCoy my address. A letter sent to Salt Springs will find me."

"What d'you want me to write you about?" asked the old man.

"Keep me posted about what's going on—anything about Cole or Miss Marigold here or—Mrs. Gregg."

"What would I know about her?"

"I don't know. Something might come up. You could keep yore ears open. I've got my reasons why I want to know about her."

McCoy did not care to discuss his reasons before Marigold. "All right, young fellow. Just as *you* say."

"But before I go I want to know what yore plans are about Miss Marigold."

"I'm gonna rent a decent house an' take her to it. I made a li'l' stake outa the Katie B mine. Marigold will have nice clothes an' a piano, anyways an organ. Soon as I sell out the mine we'll go back to where her uncles live."

"Cole won't make you trouble, will he?"

"Not likely. I'll tell folks right off I'm Marigold's grandpappy. He won't want any talk dragged out about Denny."

"He won't know you know, will he?"

"I aim to tell him," the old-timer said dryly.

"Maybe that wouldn't be so wise."

"You're the only one that's got a license to tell him the truth. That what you mean?"

"He won't hurt Mr.—my grandfather, if that's what you're thinkin' of," Marigold said. "I know him. You mightn't think it of him, but he's always watching out for his good name—as though he had any. I'll be there when my grandfather talks to him, an' when I've had my say he'll know he's got to keep his hands off or I'll tell all I know and guess."

"Maybe so," assented the cowboy doubtfully.

"What do you aim to do at Salt Springs?" McCoy asked.

"If I'm lookin' for a hole to hide in won't Salt Springs do as well as any other?" Clay asked ambiguously.

"Maybe better than some. It's on the edge of the Baker River country. If Cole crowded you, why, you could slip away into it."

"So I could," agreed Clay, an ironic little smile on his lips. "Well, I'll be sayin' adios till we meet again."

"You'll be careful," Marigold said. "Not foolhardy —or anything?"

Her little hand was buried in his. Big brown eyes, anxious and worried, asked for reassurance.

"I'll be careful," he said.

That look had sent a shock into him. For it told him, in unconscious betrayal of her thought, that nothing in the world just then mattered so much to her as his safety.

CHAPTER XVI

Clay Picks Up Information

As Clay Ballard rode into the night he had much to think of. If life was to be measured by its fullness rather than by time he had crowded a year into the past few hours. He had been released from prison. He had challenged and humiliated his enemy. He had declared his love for the most enchanting woman he had ever met and at least not been scorned. And he had seen leap into the eyes of a girl looking at him a flame not to be misunderstood.

On Lookout Hill, just above the town, he stopped to look back. As always at night, the camp roared with life —raw, young, exuberant. Occasionally the whoop of a cow-puncher sounded. He could hear the squawking of the fiddles. The flaring lights in Hell's Half Acre drove back the darkness. He knew that in Cole's Silver Palace and the other resorts the heavy feet of dancers shuffled and the figures of men and women wove in and out to form an ever-shifting pattern. In the daytime Bonanza might be decorous and dull, but after dark the lid was off. There were two reasons for its wildness. It was the temporary end of the railroad and it was the heart of the cattle country.

Somewhere in the shadows beyond the circle of light were two women who were in trouble because of kindness to him. He was riding away, leaving them to face the music alone. It seemed a scurvy thing to go, yet his judgment told him it was better so. One of them at least might be quite overwhelmed by disaster if he stayed.

Clay's chaotic thoughts came always back to Janice Gregg. She was a mystery to him. Rich in gifts and good qualities, he could guess that in largess to her friends she knew no limit. There was something royal about her. Out of a rather limited experience of women, he wondered if her very generosity had not perhaps betrayed her. Hotly he rebelled at accepting the public verdict. For the first time he objected to the labels "good" and "bad" with which society tagged women. How could it judge one like Janice, who lived so largely in her emotions, who threw her life away in handfuls without counting the cost? She talked as though she were spent, had called herself old. Yet he had never known one in whom the feminine fire burned so fiercely, had never felt one cling to him with such live, passionate eyes. Helen of Troy and Cleopatra and Mary Queen of Scots had not come into his reading, but he realized vaguely that in some way the sex of this woman was ageless.

All night he rode, the stars for a guide. They served him well, for after day had broken he found himself looking down from a hill shoulder on a sleepy little cow town which turned out to be Salt Springs.

There was a hotel of a sort. It was built of logs and had three beds for guests. When these were full riders who came to town slept out in tarps. The landlady, a tall, rawboned woman with the marks of the hard frontier life written on her face, told Clay that she could accommodate him.

He explained that he had been traveling all night and would like to sleep after breakfast.

"Suit yoreself about that. Breakfast ready in fifteen minutes," she told him.

"I'll be there with one large appetite," he promised.

She was one in whom curiosity did not bulk large, but she asked a question before she turned away. "What might yore name be?"

"Clay Ballard."

"I could 'most have guessed yore last name. Another Ballard was here a week or so ago. You favor him a lot."

"Mitch Ballard, maybe."

"Yes."

"My brother. Do you know where he is now?"

"Why, no, I don't. He didn't stay but one night. It was more'n a week ago, though. I guess it was nearer a month, come to think of it."

"I'd like to find him."

"Might ask Carl Mayer. He tends bar at the Mining Exchange."

"Didn't know this was a mining country," Clay said.

"It's not. We had some excitement in silver couple o' years ago an' the Mining Exchange got its name then. This is a cow country."

She went back to her kitchen, leaving the young man to clean up for breakfast.

When the gong sounded the dining room filled as by magic. Clay slid into a chair between a red-headed cowboy and the town blacksmith.

The cowboy grinned at him. "When I saw you up Fish Creek the other day you said you wasn't coming to town for a month."

Clay knew he was being mistaken for his brother. "When was that?" he asked.

"Why, you know when it was. Lemme see. Week ago to-morrow." The eyes of the cowboy expressed surprise, narrowing to intentness. "Say, fellow, you're not Mitch Ballard."

"No, I'm his brother," Clay said.

"You're sure his spittin' image."

"Where is Mitch?"

"I dunno where he's at now. He usta hang out around Kirby, up in the Baker River country. I ain't happened to see much of him since—since——"

The red-headed range rider did not finish his sentence, but Clay could guess how it would have ended. The man had been about to say since he came back from the

penitentiary and he had remembered in time that he was talking to Mitchell's brother.

"Mitch didn't say where he was headin' for when you saw him? I'd like to find him."

"No, he didn't. Might be a good bet for you to ride up to Kirby. Been in this country long, Mr. Ballard?"

"Not long. How far is Kirby?"

"Not so far. Maybe seventy-five miles." Redhead dropped a remark that might be either a statement or a question. "You haven't seen him lately."

"No, I haven't."

"Well, I can tell you one thing. You got a brother that will stand up an' go through. Lemme tell you one little incident I saw my own self. It was over at Cloverdale three-four years ago. Mitch an' some of the boys had ridden in to blow what money they had. They got roostered up an' sashaid over to O'Reilly's place. I won't deny they were some noisy. O'Reilly had a big bartender they called Husky Hank. He had been a prize fighter. Well, sir, the upshot of it was that this Hank undertook to bounce yore brother, an' Mitch had different notions. It was sure a pretty fight. You know how limber and supple Mitch is. But this Husky Hank had science, an' after about ten minutes of knocking* and rough an' tumble fighting he put yore brother down an' out. Mitch sure had been handled rough. This bird had chopped his face till he looked bad.

*Boxing used to be called knocking in the Southwest.

'Had enough?' this Husky Hank asks him. 'Enough for right now,' Mitch says, grinnin' back at him real impudent from the floor where he lay."

"It's Mitch all right you're tellin' me about," Clay said. "I recognize that grin."

"Mitch gets up an' someone helps him on with his coat an' he starts outa the place, kinda unsteady on his feet. Just as he passes Husky Hank the big rooster says something to him in a low voice. I didn't hear what it was, but Mitch stops right there an' shucks the coat. 'Lick me again,' he says, and wades into the bouncer. Gentlemen, hush! I never did see such a fight. More'n onct I thought Hank would kill Mitch, but it ended with the big bruiser on the floor an' Mitch leanin' up against the bar to keep from falling. Hank stayed where he was at. He didn't want any more of yore brother's game."

Someone began to tell about a fight he had seen at Lusk, Wyoming. Others wanted to recite epic battles they had been witness of, and the conversation became general.

Breakfast finished, Clay slept around the clock. He rose from bed as good as new. After supper he strolled across to the Mining Exchange saloon. A stout bald little German was polishing glasses back of the bar.

"You Mr. Mayer?" Clay asked.

"Yes, sir. Carl Mayer."

"My name is Clay Ballard. I want to find out where my brother Mitch Ballard is."

The German looked at him over his glasses. "You favor him," he admitted. Mayer spoke English with a barely perceptible German accent.

"So I've been told. I haven't seen him for years. Mrs. Sawyer said you might be able to give me information about him."

"Information?" Mayer repeated. His stolid face had all the expressive mobility of a granite tombstone.

"Where he's at, or at least where I'd be most likely to find him."

The bartender shook his head. "Sorry. Can't tell you a thing." He added guardedly, as though he wanted to be quite sure the news was innocuous: "He was in town a few weeks ago."

"On the sixth, wasn't it?"

The sixth was the day after the bank holdup.

"Was it?" Mayer asked, cold eyes fixed on the young man.

"And the seventh," Clay added. He was sure of the seventh because of the postmark on the letter Janice Gregg had showed him.

"Might have been. Me, I don't remember. Ain't even sure he was here, but seems to me I heard someone say so. Prob'ly I'm mistaken. My memory ain't what it was."

"I see it's not," Clay answered, smiling at him. "I'm not trying to harm Mitch. Quite the other way. Like I said, I'm his brother."

"Sure. If I knew where he was at I'd tell you."

Clay had come to an impasse and he knew it. "Maybe if you happened to hear where he was you could let him know I'm here," the range rider suggested.

"Staying in town?" Mayer asked carelessly.

"I don't know. What would you advise? Have I got a better chance to find him by stickin' around here than I would have by going up to Kirby, say?"

"Maybe. I do not know. If I heard where he was I could let you know," the barkeeper said cautiously.

Three men came into the room, swaggering. They were dressed as cowboys and the dust of the desert lay in every wrinkle of their clothes. Their spurs jingled. Their speech was loud and assertive. Already, Clay guessed, they had visited one or two drinking places since they had reached town.

The little German smiled affably, calling each of the three by name. The apparent leader of the trio was a big rawboned fellow with an ugly face upon which rested an unpleasant expression. Mayer, in speaking to him, used the name Schmitt.

CHAPTER XVII

The Cautious Man Says Maybe

CLAY came to instant rigid attention. His gaze fixed on the man who had been called Schmitt. There might be more than one man of that name in this part of the country, but young Ballard knew by some sixth sense of animosity rising in him that this was the one he wanted to meet.

Immediately, as though he were through at the bar, Clay turned away and seated himself at a table in a far corner. He did not want Mayer to introduce him to Schmitt. The mention of his name would put the man on guard. And he had withdrawn just in time, for he had seen the bartender's lips opening to say: "Meet Mr. Ballard."

First, Clay mastered the surge of hatred that poured hotly through his blood. What he had to do must be done deliberately, with guile. He was no killer, no wild outlaw ready to claim a life for a life, with himself as judge, jury, and executioner. He must repress all impulses to strike until he had secured evidence enough to bring this murderer within reach of the law.

How could that be done? As yet no plan suggested

itself to him. He set himself to listen, trying to get a line on the fellow.

It became apparent to him that Schmitt was a braggart and a bully. Under the influence of liquor, as he was now, he talked freely and showed a quarrelsome disposition. Toward his companions, and especially to the shorter one, a sandy-haired mild youth called Billy Best, he was overbearing. He reverted to some topic of conversation that had been under way before they came into the Mining Exchange.

"When I first seen the hammered-down li'l' runt out on the desert fixin' up a soapweed cutter I might of known sheep herdin' was about his size," he jeered, his shallow gray eyes on Best.

"I ain't ever descended to sheep herdin' yet, Cash," the cowboy denied. "If you ask any boss I've worked under he'll tell you I throw a rope far as the next man."

"Any boss you've ever worked under! Me, Cash Schmitt, I don't work under any boss. Never have since I was a kid. Never will. I'm playin' my own hand, an' I don't aim to be a knothead an' take orders from any guy."

"We can't all eat centipedes for breakfast an' barbed wire for supper, Cash," the third man said amiably. He was a long-bodied man, burned berry-brown, and he spoke with a slight drawl.

"Come to that, I ain't seen you call for many showdowns, Bob, yore own self," Schmitt said offensively.

"No, an' you won't," the brown man replied. "When I see a rookus coming I duck it if possible. Why not? I aim to live long in the land myself."

"Even if you have to knuckle under," sneered Schmitt.

The deep blue eyes of the long-bodied man looked steadily into the light shallow ones of the bully.

"When did you ever see me knuckle under, Cash?" he asked quietly. "Time and place, please."

"Hell, I don't claim you did. I ask you. What I'm sayin' is that if Billy had had any guts he would of made this fellow look like a plugged nickel, showed him up to a fare-you-well."

"That's yore opinion, Cash. Different here. I think Billy did just right. But what's the sense in chewing the rag? Let's have another drink an' forget it."

Schmitt grumbled, dropped the subject, and presently, with the obstinacy of a drunken man, recurred to it.

"All I got to say is Mitch Ballard better not have any run-in with me if he knows what's good for him. I've never met that bird, but when I do he'll sure be told where to get off at."

"I didn't have any run-in with him, Cash," explained Billy Best, evidently covering ground he had been over patiently before. "He misunderstood what I said, an' then I told him what I meant. You're lookin' at it wrong. I keep tellin' you that. He didn't aim to give

you a knock in any manner. No need for you to push on yore reins thataway."

"Said I was a four flusher, didn't he?"

"No, sir. He said *if*. If you left Sim Collins holdin' the sack. He never said you did. Claimed he didn't know a thing about it." Billy spoke anxiously. He was no intentional trouble maker; but, as he expressed it, his fool tongue sometimes ran away with him. He had, Clay gathered, met Mitch at a round-up and later reported to Schmitt some careless casual remark made by Ballard. "He couldn't 'a' meant anything anyhow, seeing as he doesn't know you."

"Say, he'd better not mean anything. If I told all I knew, you boys would see I got the Injun sign on all the Ballards an' their kin. I could tell you something—but we'll let that ride. All I got to say is that if he drops any more remarks about me he'll find there's dynamite in 'em to blow him up."

The mention of his brother's name was to Clay a most surprising coincidence. It was as remarkable as was the fact that on the first day of his arrival he had met the man against whom he owed such a debt of vengeance.

As soon as the three men had left the saloon Clay stepped up to Mayer. "I'm sure glad you got my signal not to tell Schmitt who I am," he said. "I'll be much obliged if you don't mention it to anyone for a while."

The very inexpressiveness of the stolid German face

told of a discretion carried almost to indiscretion. Mayer could look so like a blank wall that one wanted to know what was being hidden by it.

"You heard Billy tell where Mitch was last Friday," he said in a colorless voice.

"If anyone should ask you my name it's Bruce Barry," Clay told him.

"Whatever you say, young fellow. I never saw you before. Prob'ly you know your own name better than I know it."

"Have you been acquainted with this Cash Schmitt long?"

"Well, some folks would call it long and some wouldn't."

Clay smiled. "You certainly take the cake for being close mouthed. I was gonna ask you what sort of a reputation he has."

"I don't know that I ever inquired into his reputation."

"Then you probably wouldn't be able to tell me whether he's more weasel or wolf."

"I wouldn't go out of my way to pick trouble with him, if that's what you mean." Then, lest he might have said too much, Mayer added: "Or any other customer, far as that goes."

"I'll bet you wouldn't," Clay agreed, his friendly grin working. "An' I don't blame you any. You noticed I didn't say a word myself."

"A fellow gets along better if he tends strictly to his own business. I've seen more than one pilgrim planted with his boots on just because he had a running off at the mouth. No terminal facilities, you understand. Bellyached around till someone plugged him."

"This fellow with Schmitt, the one called Bob Field," suggested Clay. "He looked like one real man to me. I wouldn't hardly expect to see him running with a coyote like Schmitt."

"In this country a fellow sometimes throws in with queer partners."

"You're right he does." Clay looked straight at the other man. "Ever hear of a fellow called Chris Hard?"

"I've heard of him," Mayer admitted, after a perceptible pause.

"Killed by Jasper Cole while robbing the Bonanza bank. Thought maybe you'd heard of him—and met him. Wouldn't be surprised if he'd put his foot on the rail of this very bar."

"Maybe so."

"Any young fellow who picked him for a partner would be out of luck, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know anything about that," Mayer answered warily.

"You're not disappointin' me any. I didn't expect you would. But get this, Mr. Mayer. If Mitch should be in any trouble, any way, I'd be with him till the cows come home. Understand that."

The man with the apron stopped polishing the top of the bar. His answer was less irrelevant than it would have seemed to a stranger hearing it.

"Maybe I might be able to locate your brother," he said.

"I'll be waitin' at the gate to say much obliged, an' if you see me in here again don't forget my name is Bruce Barry."

"I'll not forget."

Mayer wondered what the young fellow had in mind, but he did not ask him.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Bargain Is Struck

MAYER wondered again when he came on night shift next day and saw the man who called himself Bruce Barry sitting at a corner table with Cash Schmitt. The chairs of the two were hitched close together, and their heads were almost touching. Schmitt was much the worse for liquor. The experienced eye of the bartender took that in at a glance. Yet, for some reason, he held his voice down to a thick murmur. It must be important business, of a secret nature, to keep the man quiet when the alcohol in him wanted to shout. Occasionally the irritation in him came snarling to the surface, but the warning hand of the young man shushed him before he betrayed the subject of their talk.

If he could have heard what was said Mayer would have been astonished.

"My people don't want any mistakes made," Clay said, and his voice carried no farther than the ear of the other man. "I gotta make sure you're the man for the job."

"What'll you pay?"

"Plenty. That ain't the point now."

"Sure it's the point. How much? I'm no cheap jack."

"Five hundred."

"I got a thousand last time."

Clay smiled incredulously. He let the smile express his doubt without putting it into words.

"I can prove it," Schmitt went on.

"Give references, can you?" asked Clay with sarcasm.

"I could, but I ain't going to. A thousand's my price. Take it or leave it."

"You're moving too fast, Schmitt. No need to quarrel about the price now. Not till after we're sure you're our man."

"Who do you come as a rep for?"

"Never mind who I represent. You'll never know till we've decided you're the best fellow to do the job. If we do."

"You talk mighty high heeled. I got something to say about it, I reckon. It'll be my neck that's in danger."

"You got by last time, didn't you?"

"Don't worry about me," boasted Schmitt. "I've got by every time."

"So you say, but you don't offer any proof," Clay retorted with a sneer. "We've got yore word for it—an' no more."

"My word's good."

"That's what I've got to be shown. Details, please. Who, when, an' where?"

"Say, fellow, who do you think you are?" Schmitt's

voice rose angrily, but Clay shushed him down. "I ain't seen the color of yore money yet. What license you got to lay the law down?"

"I'll give you a hundred to-night—soon as I'm satisfied you're the man we want."

"Well, how can I satisfy you?" Schmitt asked sulkily.

"I've told you. Give me references. Who hired you? What job did you do? Who did you—dry gulch? An' when? An' where?"

"Say, be reasonable. Is the fellow that hired me gonna tell you all about it an' put his gullet in a noose? Pass that bottle this way." Schmitt filled a whisky glass and drank it neat. He threw back his head and downed it in a gulp. "You haven't told me a thing, not even the name of the guy I'm to—bump off."

"We're doing the hiring, Schmitt. You'll know in good time."

"Tell you what I'll do, Mr. Barry, if that's yore name. I'll give you the names of the fellows I got, an' you'll slip me the hundred. How's that?"

"Names and places."

"Say, how do I know you're what you claim you are?" Schmitt broke out belligerently. "I got no guarantee but yore word, young fellow."

"Except my money. I don't generally go around makin' presents of a hundred bucks to strangers for the fun of it."

That sounded plausible. Schmitt was broke. He could

use a hundred dollars just now to advantage. After that there would be more, easily earned. All he had to do was to lie out in the brush, wait till his victim came along, then drop him with a bullet through the heart. It was a pretty safe business, highly paid. The trouble was that the opportunity did not often present itself. He could not go out and advertise.

"Money talks," agreed the killer. "But I'll say this, first off. I never removed anyone that wasn't better dead."

"You give yourself a good send-off," Clay said dryly.

"An' I never botched a job yet. I'm thorough. When I ride away there ain't any loose ends to give me away. Tell you how good I am. When I got Rick Mason I fixed it so Jud Holway was suspicioned account of trouble they'd had. Jud got three years in the pen. You'd call that pretty slick, wouldn't you?"

Clay's gorge rose at the man. He had difficulty in keeping it out of his voice and manner. A surge of anger against the fellow swept like a flood through him.

"That was thorough," he agreed. "A little tough on Jud Holway, maybe."

Schmitt waved this aside. "He's nothing but a hill billy. Learn him not to nest on a range that belongs to stockmen by rights."

"Oh, a homesteader. With four-five kids, probably."

"Or more," the big man said with a callous laugh. "That's about all he raised. I was sure tickled when the

fool jury found him guilty. Showed how clean a get-away I'd made."

"Yes, it musta given you a big laugh. How about yore other jobs?"

"I buttoned them up right, too."

Young Ballard drew back his head from the other's forward-thrust face. He felt his hand trembling. A chill ran up and down his spine. He had to fight down a sickness that for the moment enveloped his whole being. This murderer was about to tell him how he had killed his father.

"Hop to yore story," Clay said hoarsely. He busied himself winding his watch. If his eyes had just then met those of Schmitt he felt sure he would have betrayed himself.

"I got two others for—for the gents that hired me. Both rustlers. One named Flagg, the other Ballard."

Clay's trembling fingers were still busy with the watch. The other man's head was stretched almost across the table in an effort to get close, and he was speaking in a whisper. The young man knew that if his right hand left the watch it would fall instantly to the butt of his six-shooter. He must remember what he had set out to do. He must calm his wildly beating heart. He must keep telling himself that this was neither the time nor the place for his vengeance.

"Both of 'em in the Baker River country—about two weeks apart. Flagg just before dark in a gulch

down which he was drivin' a bunch of cows. He never knew what hit him. Ballard in the mornin', right outside his own shack, as he was getting a bucket of water. Course you understand, young fellow, if you ever say I told you this I'll say you're a liar an' give you hell."

Clay nodded. The sickness was still in every vein. He found it impossible to speak.

The other man looked at him, astonished. "What's the matter, fellow?"

Young Ballard pressed his heart. "Something—wrong with it. I—get thataway. The doc says——"

"You don't drink enough," Schmitt announced dogmatically, pouring himself another glass of whisky. "A he-man needs liquor in his system. You ain't touched a drop to-night. Fellow, you look white as snow. Take my advice an' tell the doc where to get off at."

The mainspring of the watch broke, yielding to the pressure of Clay's thumb and second finger. It had not been made to resist such force. The young man found a certain relief in this.

"I've broke my watch," he said, looking at its face.

"I could 'a' told you so—the way you wind it. Well, fellow, where's that hundred you promised me?"

Clay's hand went into his pocket and drew forth a roll of bills. The big man looked at it with hungry eyes.

"I ain't seen bills for a blue moon. Only gold, an, mighty little of that. Nobody's looking, but you can slip it to me under the table."

Clay found that he could control the tremor in his voice. "Get this right, Schmitt. You're to come when I send for you. I'll expect you to convince my principals that you're not four flushing. We've got to know exactly where we're at."

"I'll not throw 'em down. Don't you worry. When you give the word I'll be Johnny-on-the-spot."

A roll of bills was passed under the table from Clay to Schmitt. The latter held it close to his stomach, carefully counted the denominations, and then put the money in his pocket.

"You've done hired a man," the assassin said.

"See you stay hired," Clay said. "We'll let you know when we want you." He rose, still shaken, and passed out of the room.

Schmitt's eyes followed him doubtfully. "Say, what come over that guy?" he asked himself. "Looks to me like his boss picked a poor rep for this kind of work. He ain't got the guts to go through, I'd say."

CHAPTER XIX

Brothers

UNDER the stars Clay stopped and took off his hat. Little beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. To his surprise he felt weak. It was as though some shock had struck all the power from his vigorous, supple body. The hinges of his knees sagged. He wanted to sit down and rest.

His intention had been to ask questions, to make Schmitt tell in full the story of his father's murder, but he had found it impossible to listen quietly to it. Clay had read about men who saw red under a surge of passion, men so swept away by emotion that they were not accountable for what they did. Now he understood them, for he knew that he could not have heard from this killer's lips the ta e of his father's death without betraying himself. And he knew the form that the betrayal would have taken: a challenge leaping from the lips, the roar of guns, one or two men lying dead on the floor.

This was not the way he wished his vengeance to work out. His plan was to set a trap for the fellow, to entangle him in a web from which there was no escape.

If he read Schmitt aright the tool would betray his principal to save his own neck. There was no loyalty in the man. That was what Clay wanted, to wind the meshes of the net around the feet of Jasper Cole.

He wished now that he had not told his real name to the land ady, at the breakfast table, and to Carl Mayer. But Schmitt was leaving town at once. The chances were that he would not find out that the Bruce Barry with whom he had been doing business was in reality Clay Ballard, the son of the man he had killed. To lessen the percentage of likelihood of discovery Clay did not appear again in public until he was sure that Schmitt had gone.

From Caleb McCoy a letter came to him. It was a scrawl of a few lines.

All quiet along the Potomac [it said]. Marigold and me had our little talk with You Know Who and fixed his clock. He sure hated to take his medicine, and once it looked like he might gun me. But, boy, you should of seen Marigold stand up to him with what all she'd tell folks if he made trouble. Upshot of it was he threw up his hands and quit. Nothing else for him to do.

Nothing new about Mrs. G. He's still shining up to her.

Marigold says to tell you not to worry none about folks here. Everything is all right, and for you to keep outa trouble.

This was all right as far as it went, but Clay would have liked a line from Janice herself telling him what had taken place between her and Cole when the sheriff recovered consciousness. Had she been forced to wheedle

him back into good humor by making concessions to him? Had he turned loose his anger upon her and abused her for what she had done? When he could endure her silence no longer he wrote her a letter and begged for a line.

Three days after Schmitt had left town Mayer dropped a word to Clay.

"Stick around the American Corral about nine o'clock to-night, young fellow," he said.

Clay did not ask him any questions. He knew that Mayer would not tell him more than he wanted to divulge. The bartender liked to be mysterious. It was a part of the air of importance with which he invested himself.

"I'll be there," the young man said.

He was, but his presence was not obtrusive. While he did not at all doubt Mayer, he was not taking unnecessary chances. After finding out that nobody was there but the stable boy he waited in the shadows of a distant corner. His watch was still out of commission, but he guessed it was about nine o'clock when he heard approaching riders.

There were two of them. They stopped at the gate of the corral. One dismounted, the other leaned on the horn of his saddle while they talked in low voices. Presently the one on the horse rode away and the other led his mount into the corral.

Clay could hear the man and the stableboy in con-

versation, though he could not made out any words. The timbre of the newcomer's voice excited him. He was almost sure he recognized it. From the stall where he stood he could not be certain. Therefore he moved closer.

". . . been waitin' here," he heard the stableboy say.

The next murmured words Clay did not catch, but he got part of the lad's answer.

". . . young—kinda like you, Mr. Ballard."

Clay called his brother's name and moved swiftly forward. Another moment, and the two Ballards gripped hands hard.

"Carl told me you were here, kid," the older brother said. "Sent me word to where I was at up the river. I came in right away soon as it reached me. Figured I'd take my chance on its being a trap."

"A trap?" repeated Clay.

"Some folks are lookin' for me," Mitchell said carelessly. "Well, I'm sure glad to see you, boy. How come you to drift out to this neck of the woods?"

"That's a long story. Where can we talk?" Clay added what was in his heart: "An' I'm right glad to see you, Mitch."

"It's been a long time since we met, Clay. Lemme see. I've been gone from home nearly five years. You were a kid then."

They moved into the lighted office. Each of them looked at the other. Clay could see no great change in

his brother except that he looked harder and older. Crow's-feet were beginning to radiate from the corners of his eyes. The older brother found the younger bigger, broader, more poised. He had been five years ago a gangling boy. He was now a strong, light-stepping man, deep of chest, with well-packed muscles that rippled rather than bulged. His steady eyes gave assurance of a nervous system under perfect control, not in the least jumpy.

"You've sure grown up," Mitchell said.

"Yes. You're older yoreself."

Mitchell's face set to grim lines. "I'd ought to be. I've been through enough. Tell you about that later. Where you puttin' up?"

"At the hotel. I saved a bed for you on the chance you'd be in."

"We've got things to talk over," Mitchell said. "Better saddle yore bronc an' we'll ride out on the prairie where we'll know we're alone. That suit you?"

Fifteen minutes later the brothers rode out past the last houses of the little town. They left the road and moved knee to knee across open country.

"What brought you out here, Clay?" the elder Ballard asked a second time.

"I got a letter, anonymous. It said Father had been murdered. I came out to see. Anyhow, I'd been intendin' to come to look you up."

Mitchell's eyes grew hard. "He was murdered, all

right. I got no chance to find out who did it, but it's a cinch some of the big cattlemen had it done." The man's voice took on a note of bitter despair. "He was probably mistaken for me. The big cowmen were out to bump me off. Like I say, they didn't give me a chance to find out who killed Dad. I was framed for the pen—put through for rustling."

"You mean—you were innocent."

The elder brother laughed without mirth. "I didn't rustle that calf, anyhow. It was all fixed to send me up."

"False witnesses?"

"All cut an' dried beforehand. I was to be made an example of because I stood up to 'em and wouldn't quit. So they locked me up for three years. About seven weeks ago I got out." The harsh voice expressed the malignity that had grown in his heart like a canker during the years of his imprisonment.

"They went a long ways to win," Clay said. He understood his brother's bitterness and sympathized with it. His own anger flamed at the outrage. If Mitchell had been a rustler—and Clay reluctantly admitted to himself that it was probable—these men had no right to take it for granted in, this high-handed fashion. Surely they had wiped the slate clean when they murdered Curtis Ballard, a man scrupulously honest all the days of his life.

"What do they care who gets hurt? It's big dog eat little dog an' save the fur. I tell you, Clay, we nesters

didn't have a chance unless we fought back. They were aimin' to put us outa business any way they could. It was war—fight or quit. Me, I fought—an' you see what they did to me. I don't care for that so much, I can stand it. But Dad—killed on my account, likely."

Clay spoke quietly. "You needn't blame yoreself for that, Mitch. Dad wasn't mistaken for you."

The elder brother swung his head swiftly toward Clay. "How d'you know?" he asked, surprised.

"The man who killed him told me he was hired to get him."

"What!" exclaimed Mitchell, astonished beyond words.

"Like I say. He told me so, right here in Salt Springs, three nights ago."

Mitchell's eyes shone tigerishly in the moonlight. "Who?"

"Fellow named Cash Schmitt."

"Told you he'd killed Dad?"

"Yes. For a thousand dollars."

"An' you didn't go to shootin' right then?"

"No."

"An' you call yoreself a Ballard?"

"I wasn't callin' myself that right then."

"What kind of a dead-alive sort of cuss are you? Tell me where this fellow's at. Let me get to him. By God, I'll show him if he can go around braggin' of it."

"I spent a hundred dollars an' a lot of trouble fixin' it up so he would brag," Clay said, his voice low and even. "My idea is to give him a long rope, then to yank it tight—when it's around his throat."

"How do you mean?"

The poised composure of this youth, the confident assurance in his manner, impressed the elder brother in spite of himself.

As Clay saw it, this was not a business to be conceived impulsively, to be entered upon rashly. He tried to get this across to Mitchell.

"I didn't want to go off half cocked. Who was back of this murder? Who hired it done? Schmitt was only a tool. Let him wait till we find out who he was workin' for."

"Wait! How do you know he won't light out?"

"He won't. He's swallowed the hook I baited for him." There was a steely ring in Clay's cold enunciation. "We'll take care of Schmitt at the proper time."

"How in Mexico did he come to tell you what he'd done?"

"That's a long story, Mitch. You'd be surprised to know that all I've been doing these last weeks was brought about by what you did."

"How d'you mean, what I did?"

Clay felt an extreme reluctance to say what must be said. It would be bad enough to charge a stranger with being an outlaw. It was distressing to accuse his only

brother of crime. Every sensitive fiber of him shrank from the necessity. But he had to face the facts.

"I was arrested by Jasper Cole an' taken to Bonanza for robbin' the Cattlemen's Bank there," he said quietly.

Once more an astonished exclamation leaped from the throat of Mitchell.

"One of the men escaped. Seems I looked like him." Clay's steady gaze held the startled eyes of his brother.

"Cole—arrested you," repeated Mitchell.

"He tried to kill me first, but a deputy saved my life. Something queer about that I don't understand. Anyhow, he took me to town and threw me in jail. When it came to a showdown his witnesses wouldn't stand up for his story. Couldn't identify me. His own daughter was one of 'em. The judge had to turn me loose."

"I was the fellow that escaped, Clay," his brother said.

"I guessed that even before I was sure."

"How could you be sure?"

"Mrs. Gregg told me."

Mitchell's eyes lit. "You know her, then. Did she tell you she kept me hid all night and gave me a chance to get away?"

"Yes, she told me that, too."

"If ever I get a chance to help her I'll go the limit."

"That goes double," Clay added.

"Think of it. She takes a fellow she never saw before an' saves him outa the goodness of her heart"

Under the stars there came to Clay a sudden vision of her—beautiful and fragrant as apple blossoms, deep eyes shining with impassioned tenderness, the warm enticement of her slender body wooing him, a flaming, eager, wistful, and yet tragic figure.

"She saved my life, I reckon," Clay said.

"When?"

Mitchell listened to the story of his brother's meeting with the sheriff in Mrs. Gregg's house. To explain this it became necessary to tell of the events that had gone before. Clay did so and was aware that his brother heard what he had to say with a growing fury. His teeth ground together. When he spoke there was a savage rasp to his voice.

"One more I owe Jasper Cole," Mitchell broke out. "I never guessed he was in with the fellow that killed Dad. Good enough. I'll add that to what I've already got to pay him. An' it's surplusage at that."

"Meanin' that he killed yore friends the day they robbed the bank?"

"Meanin' exactly that."

"He was sheriff, wasn't he? Do you blame him for protectin' the town?"

"Cole knew we were coming. He laid a trap for us."

"You mean he guessed you might come."

"I mean he knew it. It was arranged between him an' Chris Hard before ever we came to town."

"Arranged?"

"Just that. Cole was to get his share. Then the bank offered a reward for robbers taken dead or alive, an' the damned traitor figured he could bump us off, cash in on the reward, an' get the glory. I was too quick for him, an' at that he didn't miss me four inches."

Clay began to see light on one point that had never been clear to him. "That was why he tried to kill me when I was arrested. He thought I was you an' figured he'd get rid of me before I told what I knew. Afterward he saw I wasn't the man, or anyhow began to doubt it. That kinda puzzled him. It wasn't till I stood up to him that he got sore at me again."

"I heard about some fellow slappin' him in court. News like that rides hard in this country when it's about a killer as well known as Jas Cole. But I didn't know you were the lad that did it. Wonder to me is you ever got outa Bonanza alive."

"I had luck, an' like I told you Mrs. Gregg knocked him unconscious just when he was reaching for his six-shooter."

"I've never seen her beat," Mitchell said, slapping his thigh with enthusiasm. "She's a wonder. That's what she is."

Clay made no comment. His feeling about Janice Gregg was too keen edged to permit him to discuss her even with his brother. When he spoke it was on an entirely different subject.

"What evidence have you got against Cole to show he was in on the bank robbery?"

"Only my say-so, an' that wouldn't go with anyone, since I'm a guilty party myself, accordin' to most folks' way of lookin' at it."

"How do you look at it, Mitch?" the younger brother asked quietly.

Clay knew quite well how an honest man ought to consider bank robbery. It was a crime that could not be justified. He had no intention of condoning it, even though he meant to stand by Mitchell and would go the limit to help him escape.

"I'll tell you how I look at it," the elder Ballard broke out fiercely. "These roosters that own the Cattlemen's Bank, the very same birds, are the ones that robbed me of three years of my life. They owned the law where I was tried, an' they sent me into hell so as to show other settlers that they were the big augers an' it didn't pay to buck them. Law! What do I care about law? It was law they used to send me up. Why wouldn't I rob their damned bank an' make 'em dig up outa their jeans to make it good? What do you think I am—a quitter with no sand in my craw?"

He spoke with bitter intensity. There was a hard glitter in the eyes that were like half scabbarded steel. One strong hand gripped hard the horn of the saddle. A rope of muscle stood out on the lean brown cheek above

the salient jaw. Clay knew that on this one subject of the justice of his reprisal against the men who had wronged him Mitchell could see no side but one.

"What about the Cloverdale bank robbery? What about the one at Big Bend?"

"I wasn't in either one of them."

Clay drew a deep breath of relief. If his brother told him he was not one of the robbers, he was not one of them.

"They say the descriptions fitted this Chris Hard and Long Jim, the other man Cole killed," he suggested.

"Both of 'em in it. Won't do either of 'em any harm now to say so. The fellow who was with the boys when they pulled off the first affair—well, no use going into that. Anyhow, he quit an' I took his place in the Bonanza raid."

"I wish to heaven you hadn't. Half a dozen witnesses could swear to you. I know, because they all said I looked like the man. You'll have to get outa the country."

"Maybe so," agreed Mitchell nonchalantly. "When I get good an' ready. But I've got business first."

"What business?"

"To settle accounts with Jasper Cole an' this Cash Schmitt. I'll not leave till I've done that."

Clay knew there was no use arguing with him. To look at Mitchell—virile, intensely masculine, hard as nails, and fearless as a lion, possessed by the passionate

desire for revenge—was to know that he could not be deflected from his purpose. He would go through, though it cost him liberty or life.

"I'll agree to that," Clay said. "Question is how. I've studied Cole. He's vain. Used to be with Quantrell in the Civil War. Calls himself a gentleman. Soft, suave manners to ladies an' to men, too, till you prick through the front he's puttin' on. Proud of his good name, just as though he wasn't a dirty killer. If we can tie him up through Schmitt to this business it will knock all the props from under his conceit an' show him up for what he is. Sentiment in that Baker River feud has changed a lot. If we prove this on Cole we can come pretty near hanging him."

"Pretty near! That doesn't get anywhere with me. It's got to be closer than that before I'll lay off him. What's the matter with you an' me settling this man to man with guns smokin'? That would be my way of it."

"Different here," Clay said. "There's a lot the matter with that way of doing business. First off, maybe you've forgot that we're both bank robber suspects, scalawags with no standing in the public eye. If we went to Bonanza an' shot Cole down, folks not acquainted with the facts would figure that he was now proved to be a good officer killed by outlaws while he was doing his duty. I don't aim to glorify this scoundrel. An' that's not all. I want him to see the net closing in on him, to sweat grief

while folks see all his pretense about being an old-fashioned gentleman stripped from him. I want him to know that everybody recognizes him for the yellow wolf he is."

"And after that?" Mitchell persisted.

"We're no worse off then than we are now, even if we don't get him hanged."

"That's right. He'd still be there for us—if he didn't get us first. Well, what's yore plan, boy? How do you figure on putting this over?"

Clay talked and Mitchell listened. Already the younger brother, by sheer force of character, was taking the lead.

Presently Mitchell offered an addendum to what he had told Clay about the circumstances leading to the bank robbery. "There's one thing I forgot. Not that it amounts to anything now. When Chris was shot he had on him a letter from the sheriff. It wasn't but two lines, but it was in Cole's own handwriting, telling us when was the best time of day to tackle the bank. Cole likely got hold of it after Chris was killed, but if he didn't an' it could be found——"

"It would blow Cole into the air—maybe," Clay agreed after a moment's consideration. "I'll sure try to locate that note—if it hasn't been destroyed."

CHAPTER XX

"You—Here!"

It is easy for a man to persuade himself that what he wants to do is expedient. Clay's longings dragged him back to Bonanza. The letter of Cole to the dead bandit, Chris Hard, offered a reasonable excuse. He must get that letter to discredit his enemy, if it was still in existence. The way to get it was to go after it himself, not to trust the embassy to another.

But if he went to Bonanza he must make it clear to Janice Gregg that his mission bore no relation to her. She must be made to realize that the conflict between him and the sheriff must go on to the bitter end, that it would have been inevitable if neither of them had ever known her. She must understand that she was not only in no way responsible for it but could do nothing to prevent it.

Mitchell jumped at his brother's proposition to try to get hold of Cole's letter.

"No time to lose. I'll start for Bonanza right damn now," he said.

Clay knew of old Mitchell's temperament, how the thought of danger filled his nostrils and sang in his blood.

"If you do you'll start for the pen," Clay told him. "A dozen witnesses are ready to identify you. The one place that's poison to you is Bonanza."

"You're figurin' on going yore own self, I reckon. Why, you just been tellin' me how Cole is waitin' at the gate for you."

"Maybe so, but I don't aim to go in by the gate. I'd slip in, find out where old Caleb McCoy's house is, an' stay under cover. My notion is to get there after dark an' not advertise I'm in town. Chances are Cole would never know I was there."

"An' if he did?"

The steady blue eyes of the younger man, with the chill of steel in them, met those of his brother. "Then it would be bad luck—for one of us."

"But which one? You, I reckon. He's a bad hombre—a killer. Twenty odd notches on his gun. You're only a kid. He'd get you sure."

"Lemme tell you about him, Mitch. He's a killer—yes. But I've talked with three-four fellows who know his record. He never takes a chance he doesn't have to. Look at the bank robbery. He was sittin' under cover with a sawed-off shotgun. Yore friends didn't have a look-in. He takes the breaks every time."

"Maybe so. That makes him more dangerous. They say he's chain lightning on the draw and a dead shot."

There was a sound like dry peas rattling in a pod. Instantly a gun boomed. Mitchell looked at the smoking

weapon in the hand of his brother, then at the snake lying in the sand with its head shattered.

"Where did you learn to shoot like that?" he asked.

"You ought to know. We've practised ever since we were kids."

"Yes, but—that's shooting. It beats me. Unless it was a bit of luck."

Clay smiled. "See the knot on that tree there?"

His revolver sounded swiftly three times. One bullet had broken the knot. The other two were imbedded in the bark within two inches of it.

"An' you twenty-five feet away in the moonlight. You're certainly a jim-dandy with a six-shooter."

Before he reloaded Clay cleaned the barrel of his weapon.

"But hitting a man when he's blazing away at you ain't the same as aimin' at a target," Mitchell went on.

"I'm not claiming a lead pipe cinch," Clay said. "I'm trying to show you it would be even Stephen on a fair break."

"An' you've just been telling me you won't get a fair break if Cole knows you're in town."

"Which I don't aim to let him know."

"Why couldn't I fix it up with this McCoy to stay with him same as you could?" demanded Mitchell. "What's in yore fool head? Think I'm going to dodge around the brush somewheres while you shoot it out with Cole? What kind of a pilgrim do you figure I am?

Boy, I got a longer score to settle with him than you have. I sure don't intend to hang back an' let you go through alone, not in this year of Annie Dominick."

"I keep tellin' you I don't mean to fight with him if I can help it. Be reasonable, Mitch. No sense in you going to Bonanza, gettin' arrested, an' being sent to the pen for twenty years. I'd call that a fool proposition. There's a reward out for you. Lots of birds in Bonanza would like to collect it. Different with me. It wouldn't mean a cent to a soul in town to throw the hooks into me. Fact is, I've made some friends there. I can name half a dozen would protect me, more or less."

"I can name one that did protect me," Mitchell countered.

"Don't you think she's done enough for the family? You wouldn't ask her to help again."

"No, I wouldn't."

"I'll bet there are fifty people in town would be for me against Cole. I don't mean they would fight for me, but they'd slip me word of trouble if they got a chance. Lots of folks in Bonanza don't like Cole. He's overbearing, an' they're afraid of him. See? They'd be for me, but they wouldn't be for you. No, Mitch, the one place you've got to lay off is Bonanza. Show up there, an' you're a gone goose."

In the end Mitchell had to give way, reluctantly, and with mental reservations. The logic of the situation was against him.

He rode next day most of the way with his brother. A few miles from Bonanza Clay drew up on a hilltop. A sanguinary sunset flooded a crotch of the jagged peaks in the west.

"I reckon we better say adios here."

Mitchell was loath to turn back. "Boy, look out for that yellow wolf," he warned.

"Every hour of the day, an' every minute of every hour," Clay promised. "I'll not throw down on myself."

The elder brother watched the younger descend into the valley and cross it. The past twenty-four hours had taught him that no man on the frontier was more competent to look after himself than Clay Ballard. But the call of kinship echoed in Mitchell's heart. After all, Clay was his brother and scarcely more than a boy.

As he rode night flowed in on Clay. The stars came out. Moonlight drenched the plains. He knew that Bonanza could not be far now.

He bore to the right, to come down into the town from the hills. After a time he saw the lights of the town twinkling below him. He dipped into a draw, crossed it, and climbed the shoulder of a butte that jutted out. There was a light in the hollow below. It came from the house of Janice Gregg.

Clay left his horse in a clump of aspens and descended. More than once he stopped to listen. He had that sixth sense which comes to men who have lived long alone

in the open, the intuition which feels the approach of someone before the eyes see or the ears hear.

He came to the picket fence, crouched behind it for several minutes, and watched. There came to him the sound of a piano, of dreamy, wistful music such as no woman in town could evoke except Janice Gregg. That she was alone he felt sure. She was talking to herself from the keyboard.

Lightly Clay vaulted the fence and moved down the garden to the back door. The latch gave to his hand. He found himself in the dark kitchen and moved cautiously across it. A narrow bar of light came in through a curtained window and showed him a door opposite. Probably this led to the parlor. He felt sure the piano was in the next room.

Very slowly he opened the door an inch or two and then looked through the crack. Janice had her back to him. He pushed the door a little farther and made sure she was alone. The hinges creaked, and she jumped up to meet him.

The color ebbed from her face. "You—here!" she cried.

In three swift strides he reached her. Her hands came out tremulously, and he buried them in his.

"Yes, I had to come back."

"Why? Why? But we can't talk here. He's coming—to-night—soon."

"I must see you, Janice."

"Yes . . . Yes . . . But not now." The agitated throb of fear was in her voice. "Later. After he has gone. I'll meet you. Say in the pines above the draw to the east of the hill back of the house. Now go, please. Oh, go!"

He went, without a moment's delay, out of the room and back through the kitchen. She followed to the door, flutteringly fearful.

"I'll wait for you," he said.

"Yes. In an hour—or maybe two," she promised.

The door closed. He heard a crisp footfall in the gravel and drew closer into the vines that shaded the side of the house. His hand moved instinctively to the butt of the weapon at his hip. A man turned in at the gate and was moving up the walk to the house. The moon made a spotlight to illumine the face of Janice Gregg's visitor.

It was the cold, bloodless face of Jasper Cole, handsome in spite of the tight, thin-lipped mouth. For one whirling moment the mad blood rushed to the head of the crouching man. Clay could scarcely keep from killing. Then the tempestuous urge of the roaring blood passed. He could not murder from ambush. Yet he knew if Cole had caught sight of him, if the man had made the beginning of a gesture to draw a revolver, he would without remorse take advantage of that split second of time with which luck had favored him.

Cole passed into the house.

The young man drew a long, deep breath of relief. He

was still shaken by the shock of the temptation that had assailed him. What he had almost done was the thing that Cole in his place would have done ruthlessly.

He made his way back up the hill to the pines above the draw. How long he waited he did not know. It might have been an hour. It might have been two. He knew she would come, and he gave no heed to the passage of time. His thoughts were full of her, of her dear delicious ways, of the music that had poured out as though born in her soul, of the fear that had driven the blood from her lips on his account. Thinking of her, he knew that for him there was no other woman in the world. She filled his horizon.

Swiftly, lightly, she came to him through the moon-dappled shadows of the pines. He moved to meet her. Again she held out both hands, this time with an inarticulate little cry that welled up out of her bosom to her throat. Clay looked hungrily down at her, then caught her yielding body to him and held it close.

"My dear! My dear! I've missed you so," she murmured.

"And I you," he cried.

For the moment words failed them. They were lovers imparadised in each other's arms.

CHAPTER XXI

The Thousand-Year-Old Heart Beats Fast

JANICE was the first to come to earth. She drew back a little from him.

"Why did you come back? Why didn't you stay away?" she asked.

"I came to get a letter that Jasper Cole wrote."

"A letter! What letter?"

"One written to Chris Hard. It was on the man when Cole killed him."

"How do you know?"

"My brother Mitch told me. Cole was in the bank robbery. He decoyed Hard and the others here. They were to rob the bank and divide with him. His part was to see that the coast was clear and later to guide the posse in the wrong direction."

"But—I don't understand. How could that be when he killed two of them?"

Clay's voice was bitter. Contempt welled out of it. "He betrayed and killed them. Decided after all to play for the reward and the reputation he would get out of it."

Her eyes were big with incredulity. "Jasper Cole did that?"

"Yes. That explains why he shot at me in the hills after I had surrendered. He thought I was Mitch. It explains why he killed one of the outlaws who was already badly wounded. Couldn't afford to give him a chance to talk."

Janice stared at him, but what she saw was something entirely different. An eyewitness had told her of the furious rage with which the sheriff had pumped lead into the body of the prostrate bandit. Had his rage been merely a pretense? Had the man been moved by a cowardly instinct of self-protection against the man he had betrayed to his death? The thing was horrible, but it was conceivable.

"He—didn't want to take them alive?" she asked in a low, horrified murmur.

"No."

"He was afraid of what they would say?"

"That was one reason—the big one. The other is that they were desperate men and couldn't be taken without a fight. So he chose the easy way. The last thing they expected was to be attacked by him. Or by anyone, for that matter. The robbery had gone smoothly. Nobody had gone in or out of the bank. No shots had been fired. How could any warning have been given of what had just taken place? A boy could have killed them without risk. That's how Jasper Cole does his killing."

"It's—horrible," she said. "I didn't know there were such men."

"There aren't many, but the West has always had some killers like that. Cole is one."

Presently she came out of her distress to ask a question. "About that letter. Where is it?"

"I don't know. Cole may have got hold of it and destroyed it. Very likely he did. But De Castro once told me that he did not touch the bodies before he went out with the posse. The coroner might have that letter. Or the undertaker, maybe. It's just a chance, of course."

"What will you do with the letter if you get it?"

"Use it to discredit Cole."

"He wouldn't like that," she reflected aloud. "He's very touchy about how he stands with the people. I never knew a vainer man, though he hides it under that cold mask he wears."

"I want to tell you something else," Clay said. "At Salt Springs I met the man who killed my father. I believe Cole hired him to do it, but I am not sure yet. The man confessed that he had been paid to do it."

"Confessed—to you?"

"I gave him another name as mine. I pretended to be hiring him to do away with an enemy. He told me about —my father—to prove to me he could be depended on to go through."

"He didn't implicate Mr. Cole?"

"No. He didn't get that far, but I think he may,"

Clay gave her a line on his plan. "If we can trap him before witnesses he will betray Cole in the hope of saving himself."

"And then?"

"I don't know. There's law in the land, and back of it a strong sentiment against such cold-blooded murder. He could be convicted, maybe."

Janice knew that though this might be true Cole would not sit back and wait for the law to seize him. He would strike, swiftly, in his favorite way, at the man setting its machinery in motion.

"You won't give up this plan, even if I ask you—if I tell you it will make me unhappy?"

"You won't ask it," he told her confidently. "It's my job. What kind of a man would I be to let the murderer of my father get away because I hadn't enough sand in my craw to sick the law on him? You wouldn't ask it, an' you'd despise me if I quit because you did."

She looked at him, this straight, brown, clean man whom she loved. There beat in her a primitive pulse of pride. He would walk the way of the strong. Not even the pleading of the woman he wanted for his mate would deflect him from the course he felt was right.

"No, I'll not ask that," she said. "But I'll ask you to be, oh, so careful. You'll do that for me, won't you? You'll not be—reckless and foolish?" Her body made a little rustling motion toward him. Her fingers closed on

his arms. He felt her holding him close, as though to protect him from harm.

Happiness sang in his blood. "I'll promise that," he said. "I've got a lot to live for."

She gave a little sigh and nestled to him, her soft, velvety cheek against his. When her eyelashes brushed his face they sent a tingle through his veins.

"Why do you come making me love you, since I have to worry so much about your safety?" she reproved, tenderness and humor in the low throat murmur.

Pride in him was exalted. "Have I made you do that?"

"I think so. I've missed you so much. Listen, dear brown man. It's different with me than it's ever been before. From that hour when you came to my house—so much a boy, so much a man—I've thought and dreamed of you alone."

"With that thousand-year-old heart of yours?" he asked, concealing his elation under mockery.

"Yes. I've no right to you. Nothing can come of it. I know that. But—I suppose we're all alike at bottom, we women. We want our mate."

He held her close. "You'll have yours," he promised valiantly.

"No. We can't set the clock back. What is written is written. I've made my choice. I know that the wages of sin aren't a happy home and a husband and—babies.

A woman gives up these when she steps outside the code."

Clay waved this aside magnificently. "I don't care what you've done. I know what you are. I love you for that."

There were tears in her voice. "I love you for loving me. But—you must forget. Find some nice girl like Marigold Cole. I've been to see her, though her funny little grandfather didn't much want me to come. I've been dressing her. She's really very pretty—and she likes you very much."

Quietly he followed the thought in his mind, one traitorous to his generation but with a large following in the next.

"We're not talkin' about Marigold Cole but about Janice Gregg. Why should it be different with a woman than with a man? Why must a mistake be fatal to her? I've been thinking about it. We're human beings, men an' women, too. There's a to-morrow for everybody who hasn't given up. The one sin that can't be forgiven is to quit—to lie down an' stay down an' admit you are beaten. I reckon God himself couldn't do anything with a man who hasn't got some fight in him."

"A woman can't make herself over, can she?"

"Just as much as a man can. But you don't have to make yoreself over. We've come to a fork in the road, you an' I, too. We can take the hill trail instead of the one that leads down into the fog an' the boggy land.

An' we can take it hand in hand. When I find a hundred things in you to—to care for—do you think I'd give you up because yore little feet have walked wild, dangerous paths an' slipped on them so that you've stumbled and hurt yoreself? Why, I must love you more for that, so as to make sure you'll be happy now."

"That's just dear foolishness, Clay boy. We must be practical."

"Yes, and not morbid."

She shook her head, looking at him from troubled eyes. "When I'm with you I think it's almost possible, but when I'm alone again I know life isn't like that," she told him. "Now I want to talk about your affairs. What are you going to do about the letter? How have you planned it to see Dr. Hayes and Gluck the undertaker?"

"I'm going to ask old Caleb McCoy to let me stay secretly at his house. Then at night I'll try to see Hayes and Gluck."

"I'll arrange it for you. Go to Mr. McCoy's and stay there till I come to-morrow after dark."

"I mustn't bring you into this, dear."

"It can't hurt me. There's one thing I've got to say to you. I'll never let Jasper Cole into my house again if I can help it. I'll never speak to him again in friendship. The reason I haven't broken with him is because I thought I might talk him out of his hatred of you. But it's no use. I give him up."

"I'm glad," he said simply. "The man's bad—bad at heart. You ought not to know him."

"I think he rather fascinated me at first. Back of that mask he wears he was a mystery and I tried to solve him. I couldn't believe he was as bad as some people said. . . . Now I must go, dear."

"Where is the house in which McCoy lives?"

"It's the little log house down by the river just this side of the bridge. Good-night." Anticipating his intention, she added: "No, you can't go with me a single foot of the way. We'll part here."

He did not try to alter her decision. Better, he felt, not to waste his ammunition in minor conflicts. The important one he meant to win.

CHAPTER XXII

Janice Reads a Note

FROM her childhood Janice Gregg had rebelled at conventions. She wanted to be an individual rather than to be a conformist molded by those about her. It was in her horoscope to drink deeply of life, and her scorn of timid compliance had led her to make no secret of it. Too late she had learned that the pressure of social opinion was too strong for her.

Her father had been a manufacturer of boots in New England and had left her sufficient means to live well. Rumor had been very busy with her name. There was scandal enough, but the facts to back it were vague. She had run away with Gregg, an army contractor, and Gregg had been killed at Dodge. There had been a wild affair with a cavalry lieutenant in southern Arizona. A handsome, long-haired gunman of the plains had been wildly jealous of her and had killed a freighter and a buffalo hunter because of their attentions to her. So men whispered to one another. But the reports were hearsay for the most part.

Since her arrival in Bonanza a few months earlier the only name linked with hers was that of the sheriff.

The fact that Janice frequented the Silver Palace as a patron made it easy to believe that Jasper Cole was her lover. He was a bold, possessive man, good looking, and openly devoted to her. The town drew its own conclusions. Contemptuous of tittle-tattle as usual, Janice had taken no trouble to protect herself against this deduction. No good woman would dare set foot inside the Silver Palace, notorious as a dance hall and gambling place. That Janice did so was prima facie evidence of guilt. Young though she was in years, she had long known that it was no use to try to swim against the tide. She had become a marked woman.

Into her life had come striding Clay Ballard as a disturber of her unhappy peace. To be in love with him was sufficient madness, but to let herself become persuaded by the energy of his passion that there could be happiness for her was complete absence of sanity. Women who were victims of temperaments like hers must go their appointed way.

None the less, hope had been reborn in her heart. It trod in her feather-footed step as she walked along Custer Street to the office of Dr. Hayes. For a quarter of an hour ago she had parted from her lover.

There was a light in the doctor's office. Janice found him in.

The sandy-haired little doctor with the red mustache liked Janice Gregg, though his conscience did not approve of her. He looked into the deep violet eyes and

smiled. She seemed the picture of health, and he said so.

"I'm not here as a patient, Doctor," she told him.

Hayes was curious to know why she had come, but he did not say so. He could afford to wait. Since he was a bachelor, a visit from Mrs. Gregg could have no domestic complications. Perhaps she wanted him to take care of some poor family in trouble.

"My business is confidential," she went on. "I want to know whether you found any letters on the body of the outlaw Hard when you searched his clothes."

Hayes grew cautious. "What letters do you refer to?"

"I suppose you did search the body. That would come within your duty as coroner, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would fall within the scope of my duties," he admitted, a little formally. He did not quite know where she was leading him, but he had a suspicion she came from Cole. If so, he must tread warily.

"And you found a letter?"

"I told Sheriff Cole I had found no letter."

"Mr. Cole asked you if you had found one then?"

Dr. Hayes shifted a little uneasily in his chair. It did not seem in Mrs. Gregg's character, as he read it, to try to trap him into trouble, but he could not see any other genesis than Cole as the cause of this inquiry. The sheriff himself had asked these same questions, and for some reason obscure to himself the coroner had not told him the truth. Now he was sending Mrs. Gregg. Why? What importance was there to the twisted note

he had found in the pocket of the outlaw? How did Cole know of the letter? There was something mysterious about this.

"I don't know what this is all about, Mrs. Gregg. As I said before, I told the sheriff there was no letter." Hayes spoke a little brusquely. He was annoyed, and he was a trifle disturbed.

Janice turned on him her most winning smile. "I'm awfully glad you told the sheriff so, Doctor, but I'm sure that's not what you are going to tell me. There was a letter, you know."

"How do you know there was?"

"The outlaw who escaped says so."

Astonished eyes met hers. "Does Cole know who the outlaw was?"

"No, he doesn't know. But I do."

"I don't think I understand you, Mrs. Gregg."

"Let's clear the decks for action, Doctor. To begin with, I'm not here for Sheriff Cole. I am no longer on friendly terms with him. I have come for the best reason in the world—to bring about justice."

"Hmp! Justice is an elastic word, Mrs. Gregg. Can you be more explicit, please?"

"I can—to you. Because you are an honorable man, Dr. Hayes. I've always been sure of that. But whatever I tell you must be in the strictest confidence."

He met her lovely eyes. "I shall so regard it."

"Sheriff Cole wanted that letter because he wrote it

himself. He intended to destroy it. I hope you haven't done that."

"*Cole* wrote it? You mean—to this man Chris Hard?"

"Yes. He was telling Hard when to come and rob the bank."

"But that doesn't make sense, Mrs. Gregg. He's our sheriff. He killed these men when he found them robbing the bank. I don't see what you mean."

A sudden flaming heat leaped into her answer. "I mean that Jasper Cole is a villain. He plotted with these men to rob the bank. He enticed them here and then betrayed them to their deaths."

His bushy eyebrows lifted. Both the charge and the feminine ferocity of it amazed him. "But why?" he asked.

"For the reward, and for the glory of it." She added with a blazing scorn: "That's why he killed the wounded one before he had a chance to talk—and that's why he tried to murder Clay Ballard after he had surrendered."

Dr. Hayes did not answer. His mind was busy piecing together the details of the affair. He recalled the immediate suspicion of his friend Lyons, based on intuition rather than evidence. Facts that had been obscure as to meaning became clear when dovetailed into this new theory. On the face of it the supposition that Cole had been a party to the raid was preposterous. Yet it would be in character, too, for back of the sheriff's blank wall eyes he felt the existence of a mind feral and unhuman.

Evidently Mrs. Gregg had quarreled with Cole. Was she out for revenge? The situation seemed to shape that way, but Hayes could not quite believe it. He had conceived her to be a woman above petty meanness, one too scornful of her enemies to be vindictive. Very likely his judgment had been wrong. Certainly she must show a good reason before he helped her. He did not intend to be her cat's-paw.

The doctor played for time. "It's hard to think that of Cole, Mrs. Gregg. It has never been charged that he is not a good officer, whatever else may have been said of him."

"Yet you believe what I've told you, just as I did when I heard it."

"I haven't said so," he protested. "It looks to me like a far-fetched guess, but I don't say it isn't true. What I do say is that you haven't given me enough evidence of its truth to convince me."

Instantly she took up the challenge, in the way that suited her purpose. "I know his handwriting. If you'll show me that letter I can tell you whether he wrote it."

Hayes smiled. "About the escaped robber, for instance. I don't want you to tell me who he is. I'd much rather not know. But how did he come to tell you this about Cole? Do you mean you've actually met and talked with him?"

"I've met and talked with him." Little imps of mischief danced in her eyes as she tossed her bomb at him.

"I helped him to escape. He spent the night after the robbery at my house."

"At your house? The night of the robbery?" he repeated, astounded.

"Rebecca looked after the proprieties," she assured him gayly.

"You hid him while Cole's posse hunted the hills."

Triumph rode in her full-throated laughter. "That was too bad, wasn't it?"

He plucked an emotion of admiration out of the audacity of this unique woman. "It's very much against the law to be an accessory after the fact," he mentioned.

"Please don't tell Mr. Cole," she mocked, eyes dancing at him.

"I don't think you're worrying," he said, and harked back to the question of the day. "If this outlaw told you about Cole, then I don't see why you have waited so long before seeing me."

"He didn't tell me. I've had word from him since." She hesitated, almost imperceptibly, in order to keep within the truth and yet not tell too much. "He wrote me—and afterward he sent me a message. I didn't know till last night."

"What would you do with this letter if you had it?"

Watching the sudden color beat into her cheeks, she seemed to him for the moment a young girl rather than a woman with the shadow of too much knowledge hang-

ing over her. That pink wave driven from an accelerated heart, that flash of starry eyes, betrayed her to his experience. She was in love.

"I would use it in the cause of justice," she told him.

"We're back where we started from," he said.

"So we are. I suppose I'll have to tell you more. I don't want to. It's dangerous to talk. But I must have that letter."

"Dangerous—in what way?"

"To talk too much, I mean. But you are safe. I would trust you before almost any man in town."

"I wish you didn't have to trust me. I don't want your confidence. I'd like to keep out of this," he said ruefully.

"I know you would." She came abruptly to her story. "It's Clay Ballard. Jasper Cole had his father killed. He's on the track of evidence. He needs this letter to show what kind of man Cole is."

"You don't mean that young Ballard was the bank robber after all, do you?"

"Oh, no! He's not that kind of man—not at all."

"Then how does he tie up with the robber and the note?"

"I can't go into that, Dr. Hayes. He has met him, though."

"Hmp! One mystery seems to lead to another. I suppose you know that if I let you have this letter I'll be in serious trouble with Cole."

"I'd thought of that," she replied eagerly. "Would

he have to know you gave it to us? Couldn't he be led to think the escaped robber had found it where this Hard had cached his blanket roll? And that he had sent it to us?"

Hayes nodded his head thoughtfully. "That might do —for a time. The truth would have to come out at the trial—if there ever was one. It wouldn't look very well for me—the fact that I had withheld evidence from the sheriff. I don't know why I didn't give the letter to Cole. Something about his manner made me suspicious. I had a feeling things weren't right."

From his coat pocket the doctor drew a worn black leather case. He opened this, selected an envelope, and handed it to Janice. The flap was sealed. On the face of the envelope a notation had been endorsed.

Found on the body of Christopher Hard, shot by Sheriff Cole, July 17, after robbing the Cattlemen's Bank at Bonanza.

"Am I to open this?" Janice asked.

"Yes." Hayes handed her a paper cutter.

Her fingers trembled as she ran the blade along the crease. Would she find inside evidence of Jasper Cole's guilt? Or of his innocence?

Inside were an envelope and a slip of paper. The former was addressed to Mr. Christopher Hard, at Kirby. The stamp had been canceled at Bonanza, July 12. The letter bore no signature and consisted of two lines.

Come Wednesday and everything will be all right. Soon after noon is the best time.

Janice looked at the doctor. "It's Jasper Cole's writing," she said. "He tried to disguise it, but there can't be any mistake. He always makes his *o*'s like that. And notice the final *l* in the word all. He started to leave the tail of it dragging as he usually does and then he decided to draw it up, using another stroke."

"I don't doubt you are right, Mrs. Gregg. Now if you want a copy of this you can take one. I'll have to keep the original, for the present at least."

"Thanks awfully, Doctor. I'll copy it now. And we'll be very careful about bringing you into it."

"I can trust you. But how about your partner—the other member of the 'we?'"

"He's absolutely reliable. I'd stake my life on him," she said.

"You go far, but under the circumstances—since it's my life and not yours that Mr. Cole might snuff out—I think I'll have to ask you for his name."

"I told you—Clay Ballard."

He let a little significant smile dwell in his eyes as he looked at her. "I congratulate the young man on his choice of a lady who would lay down her life for him."

Again the color wave stained her cheek. "It may interest you to know that I have spoken to Mr. Ballard only three times in my life," she replied in defense.

"Then he is to be congratulated the more. Three times, you say. That seems to prove that it isn't a matter of many words."

Laughter was in her eyes. It bubbled over her face. "You're talking foolishness, Doctor, and you know it. But you can say anything you like, since you've been so nice about the letter."

"All I can say is that I wish I were twenty-five again —if I could be a bronzed six-footer and induce Mrs. Gregg to stake her life on me."

"Have it your own way," she said, tossing a gay little lift of the chin at him.

She copied the note and rose to leave.

He watched her as she passed down the street, the movements of her fine vigorous body rhythmic in their grace. She was no doubt a sinner, and he ought to disapprove of her. But how generous and gallant in soul! What a wonderful lover for a man to win! It did not hurt her cause with him, he admitted cynically, that she had lifted lustrous eyes to his in friendship and that the sinner's spirit was clothed in fleshly beauty.

CHAPTER XXIII

Clay Mentions Business

WHEN Clay knocked at the door of the log house by the river it was Marigold who opened to him. He was amazed at the change in her appearance. The Cinderella look had vanished. She was nobody's stepdaughter now. That clothes and a new environment could make such a transformation was hard to believe.

She was in a fresh pink summer dress. Her shoes were new. The wild rebellion of her hair had been reduced to a becoming wave. All that was something, but much more was the difference in herself. The big eyes were no longer sullen and dissatisfied. An inner joy had breathed life into her, infused her being with happiness.

Clay was standing in the shadows outside, and at first she did not recognize him.

"It's Clay Ballard," he said. "Is Mr. McCoy at home?"

"What are you doing here?" she cried. Then almost in the same breath: "Come in."

He followed her into the house. She closed the door and made sure all the curtains of the room were drawn. Curiously, in her pretty clothes, with the confidence born of an environment where she was praised and

petted, the awkwardness and gaucherie due to self-consciousness had vanished. It struck Clay that there was a precious flowerlike quality about the child.

"Why did you come back?" she asked. "You said—you promised——"

"I didn't promise to stay away," he told her. "Fact is, something came up—business. I had to come an' 'tend to it."

"Business!" She spat the word out scornfully. "With that man waiting here to kill you. Haven't you any sense at all?"

"Yes, Miss Marigold, some. I don't aim to tell him I'm here. That's why I came to yore grandfather's house. I'm hopin' he'll let me stay here under cover."

"Of course he will. That's not the point. You oughtn't to be in town at all. If you knew that man as I do——"

"He hasn't made you any more trouble?"

"No. He's afraid I'll make him trouble. He doesn't want to be found out. I've changed my name. It's Marigold Sullivan now."

"Looks to me like you've changed a good deal more than yore name," he said, smiling at her. "Looks like some fairy godmother sure enough touched you with her wand."

"Do you like my dress?" she asked shyly.

"It's right pretty."

"Mrs. Gregg made it for me. She said I wasn't to tell anyone. She said folks wouldn't understand. But I

don't care. She's—different from what folks think. I love her." The color flamed into the girl's cheeks. All the adoration of her ardent young nature had gone out to the one woman who had been kind to her.

He felt the blood burning in his cheeks. "She's the best friend in the world," he said.

"And the loveliest," she added swiftly. "I've never seen anyone like her."

"Nor I," he agreed. "If I could tell you——"

For one instant understanding eyes rested in his before long lashes drooped to the cheeks to draw a curtain over the secret they might betray. In spite of her newborn confidence Marigold was humbly convinced she could never draw the fancy of a man who had looked on Janice Gregg. Her mind flung out a flier for a conversational safeguard.

"If you've just come to town perhaps you've had no supper," she suggested.

"Not a bite. If you could give me a cold snack——"

She began to bustle around making supper for him. Before it was readv her grandfather came home. He had been up town.

Caleb McCoy's faded blue eyes opened wide with surprise. "Well—well! I'll be dawggoned if we haven't got here with us again Chief Spit-in-the-Wolf's-Face. What's the idea, young fellow? Who give you an invite to Bonanza?"

Clay gave his stereotyped answer: "Back for a few

days on business. If it's not convenient to have me here, Mr. McCoy, throw me out on my ear."

"Who said it wasn't convenient?" the old buffalo hunter snorted. "Hmp! Business. Do you aim to do that business with a six-shooter?"

"I thought you knew what a peaceable citizen I am," Clay said mildly. "No, sir, a little legal business needin' my attention."

"With the sheriff, I reckon," McCoy replied suspiciously.

"Yes and no."

"If I was to tell you a piece of news would you be sensible or would you go gun-crazy?"

"Did you ever know me to use a gun?"

"Supper's ready," Marigold announced, coming in from the kitchen. "Like to wash up, Mr. Ballard?"

"I sure would," he said.

After he was seated at table, doing his best with a dish of ham and eggs, Clay resumed the previous subject of conversation. "About that piece of news, Mr. McCoy? I'm all set for it."

"Do you remember me mentionin' to you a fellow called Cash Schmitt?"

The young man's face grew grim. "Yep. What about him?"

"He's in town. Rode in this evening. Put his horse up at the Buffalo Corral. Right now he's at the Cowboys' Home bucking the faro game."

This was news with possible dynamite in it. If Schmitt and Cole were on particularly friendly terms and Schmitt should get to talking, he might tell the sheriff about the new deal he had on foot to remove a party undesirable to certain other parties. He might even mention the name of Bruce Barry. If so, the fat would be in the fire at once. This was not likely, unless Schmitt should be drinking hard. The man was a blowhard, but he must know that a hired killer's safety lay in silence. A more pregnant danger was the chance that Cole would warn him of danger from the son of Curtis Ballard. It would be like the sheriff to persuade Schmitt that Clay was, in the parlance of the country, "looking for" him. It was not out of reason that he might quicken Schmitt's impulse to shoot from ambush by adding a bonus for the death of his enemy. The more Clay thought of this last the more weight he gave it.

He must spring his trap before the two men got together. Very likely Cole did not yet know Schmitt was in town. Even if he did he would perhaps wait until the latter had spent his money and would be more receptive to a suggestion for earning more. From the sheriff's point of view a day or two longer would make no difference.

"Yore news is right interesting," Clay admitted. "I've already met Schmitt an' had a talk with him. Probably he's losing right now a hundred dollars I gave him."

The faded eyes in the wrinkled face of the old man lit up. "A hundred dollars *you* gave him?" he asked.

Clay told the story of his meeting with the man. Marigold sat watching him, her big brown eyes dilated with excitement.

"I've got to move fast," the young man said. "Right away—to-night. To-morrow might be too late. I've got to have witnesses—responsible ones. Nobody would believe my say-so, not unless it had good backing. Is there any prominent citizen of this town who doesn't like Cole an' isn't afraid of him?"

"I don't know any," McCoy said dryly. "He's got enemies, if that's what you mean. Most of our best citizens would be glad to see him eat crow. But they'd all hate to cook up the dish an' offer it to him. They ain't liable to forget what a bad hombre the fellow is. Folks don't want to start something they're going to rue."

"All I want is to sick the law on him. They needn't know I'm implicating Cole. Fact is, I don't know that I am. Schmitt hasn't admitted to me that Cole hired him. My idea is to call for a showdown with Schmitt to-night. There must be some good citizens here who stand for law and justice."

"I expect Doc Hayes an' Ben Lyons, superintendent of the Three Nuggets mine, would about toe up to yore requirements. They're both fine straight shooters,

in a way of speakin', an' they're against skulduddery."

"Grandpa doesn't mean they are gunmen," Marigold explained.

"I understand. They want what's right. Have they the guts to stand up for it?"

McCoy stroked his stubbly chin dubiously. "I'd say yes—within reasonable limits. Like Marigold says, they ain't either of them fightin' men."

"I want to meet 'em both, right away. Can you bring them here?"

"Maybe so. I reckon. If I can find where they're at."

"I'll go get them," Marigold offered eagerly.

McCoy shook his head. "Too late for you to be out on the streets alone, honey. I expect I can trail 'em down. You stay here with Clay an' do yore dishes. I don't want you in this, anyhow."

The old buffalo hunter reached for his hat and limped out of the house.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mr. Cash Schmitt at Bat

THREE men sat at the table. Two of them were Clay and the old buffalo hunter, the third was Schmitt. The latter had been drinking steadily for hours and was still at it. He was in a boastful and quarrelsome state of mind, inclined to be irritable at trifles.

Leaning across the table, he shook a belligerent forefinger at McCoy. "If you're the fellow that wants this job done, put up or shut up. You don't look to me like you had any thousand plunks tucked away in yore jeans. Talk turkey, you old vinegarroon. My name is Cash Schmitt, see. Money first."

Clay sat on the right hand of the man, watching him with vigilant eyes. Now he interrupted.

"Not so fast, Schmitt. Rick Mason an' Flagg an' Ballard. Those are the three you claim. Give us some proof."

The big man slammed a fist down on the table. "I been through all that with you two-three times. I done told you how an' when an' where. What more you want?"

"Give us a reference. Someone that hired you. If it's like you make out, there must be someone in this country can vouch for it. Take Ballard now. Ain't there anyone you can send us to?"

Schmitt glared at him. Three or four times he had been on the point of knocking the head off this young guy who stuck to his point so insistently.

"Yes, sir, there is. Right in this town. You'd be s-surprised if I told you. A man 'way up. But—nothing doing. I'm no blabber, y'understand."

Clay lifted his shoulders insolently, jeering at the killer. "You talk heap much, Schmitt. What man 'way up? It don't look reasonable to me. Not by any means. Anyone can brag what he's done an' then lie down when a fellow asks for proof. A man 'way up! Hmp!"

"For four bits I'd work you over, fellow," roared Schmitt. "I got a mind to do it right now."

Clay looked at the man with cold distaste, unmoved by his threat. "Thought we were talkin' business. Listen, Schmitt. We're ready to come through with three hundred in cold cash as a second payment soon as we know you'll go through. But we're no knotheads. We got no intention of scatterin' our money to the birds. You claim there's some big guy in town who backed you once. Who is he?"

The young man reached into his pocket and drew out a leather pouch. From it he took fifteen twenty-dollar gold pieces and stacked them in front of him.

Then he folded his elbows on the table and looked at Schmitt.

"I don't take any stock in that story myself," McCoy said with a skeptical grin. "Someone in this very town. You're tryin' to string us, Schmitt."

"You can't talk thataway to me, you li'l' wart," snarled Schmitt. "Ask Jas Cole whether I'll go through."

"What would Cole know about it?" Clay demanded scornfully.

"Never mind what he knows, fellow. I'm sayin' no more." Schmitt's eyes gloated on the gold. "Shove the mazuma this way, young fellow."

"Not yet. Why mention Cole? Everyone knows he's above suspicion. Everyone knows he wouldn't have any dealings with you. Why, he's sheriff."

"Sure he's sheriff." Schmitt laughed unpleasantly. "All right. Let it go at that."

"Are you giving him as a reference?" Clay asked.

"No, sir, I ain't. Neither him nor any other man. I'm giving Cash Schmitt as a reference. Take it or leave it."

Clay held the mouth of the sack to the edge of the table and with the palm of his left hand raked the gold into it. He knotted the pouch and put it back into his pocket. "If that's yore last word, Schmitt, we'll leave it. No hard feelings, but you're not the man we want."

Schmitt snarled at the young man, his yellow teeth

showing. In his shallow eyes evil lights threatened. "S-say, fellow, you can't play horse with me—not for a holy minute. I'm here to get that kale. Understand?"

The steely gaze of Clay did not flinch. When he spoke his words were evenly spaced, his voice low and hard. "You'll get it if and when I say so. Don't try to ride me, Schmitt. It won't buy you a thing."

"Don't you try to crowd *me*, pilgrim. I'm Cash Schmitt, a top hand in a rookus. Onct I get started I'll make you look like a plugged nickel. Me, I was a lobo wolf when yore maw was warmin' you with a clapboard. Can't any man alive run on me. Not none."

Clay rose. "When I hire me a hand I don't hire a boss. 'Nough said. You can go down the road any time it suits you."

The eyes of the two men fought, and the shifty ones of the hired killer gave way.

"I aim to be reasonable," Schmitt growled sullenly. "What's the idea in pickin' on me? Don't I keep tellin' you I'll give satisfaction?"

"An' I tell you once for all that there will be no payment in advance, outside of the hundred you've already got, until I'm satisfied. If you've done work for Cole, say so. Come clean. What are you scared of? Did he hire you to get Ballard? Or didn't he?"

"I already told you he did," Schmitt said sulkily.

"What did he pay you?"

"A thousand."

"Where was he when you fixed it up?"

"Down in Denver. The rustlers were stealin' the big ranchers blind. Cole represented a group of cattlemen. They couldn't convict the waddies in the courts, so they had to bump 'em off."

"Where were you in Denver?"

"At the Windsor Hotel. Why all the questions, fellow?"

"Anyone else present except you an' Cole?"

"No."

"Did he mention just who he represented?"

"No, he didn't. Just said a bunch of cowmen. That'll be all the questions I aim to answer. Gimme the three hundred an' tell me who I'm to dry gulch. You can't bully-puss me any longer."

Clay again counted out the three hundred and pushed the gold across the table to Schmitt. The bad man counted it, eyes glittering with excitement.

"Who is this bird I'm to get?" he asked.

"Ever hear of a young fellow called Ballard, son of the Curt Ballard you shot?"

"Y'betcha! Is he the rooster you want bumped off? I'll tell you gents right now it'll be a pleasure to accommodate you. I'm layin' for him on my own account. Mighty soon I'll be back for the other six hundred."

"I'm not so sure about that, Mr. Schmitt."

Some threat in the words, some menacing change in Clay's manner, startled the big ruffian, drunk though he was. A sudden dread drenched his heart. He looked into eyes savagely triumphant.

"W-what's eatin' you?" he gasped.

A door opened behind him. He whirled, crouching like a trapped wild beast. Into the room had come Dr. Hayes and Ben Lyons, strangers to Schmitt. Glaring at them, he reached for his gun. For he knew he had been trapped and instantly decided to fight his way out.

Fingers closed on his wrist. He turned with a savage growl. The long barrel of a .45 descended on his temple. A flash of lightning zigzagged through him. The hinges of his knees collapsed, and he went heavily down, the revolver clattering on the floor beside him.

Clay picked up the weapon and handed it to McCoy. His fingers passed deftly over the body of the fallen man, searching for a second gun. He found no other.

"Quick work, Mr. Ballard," Lyons said. "He meant to shoot his way out. You stopped him before he started."

"Did you hear everything he said?" asked Clay.

"Practically everything. He talked himself into the penitentiary or to the gallows."

"And Cole—what about him?"

"I don't know. This fellow certainly implicated him. There would have to be corroborative evidence, I suppose."

Dr. Hayes knelt beside the unconscious man. "Better bring me water and a towel, McCoy," he said.

Schmitt came back blinking to a world disappointing. Hammers beat in his head. The pain of their impact crashed through him. Echoes of them drummed in his ears.

His shallow shifting eyes rested resentfully on Clay. "You hit me," he charged angrily. "When I wasn't lookin', fellow."

"You're damn whistling he did," McCoy chortled, satisfaction beaming on the wrinkled old-pippin face. "Slickest I ever see the way he did it, an' you just wildin' up to be a curly wolf. Wish you could see yoreself now, Mr. Cash-in-the-box Schmitt. He's made you look so bad yore ears flop."

"Hit me when I had my back turned," Schmitt complained.

"I'd bellyache about that if I was you," McCoy mocked. "An' you a bad hombre from the Guadalupe by yore way of it. Yes, I'd sure put up a holler about him slappin' you down before you got to smokin'."

Schmitt paid no attention to the old buffalo hunter. A red-hot devil of malice was in the gaze that fastened on young Ballard.

"I aim to kill you, fellow," he said savagely.

"If you get a chance," Clay amended. "You're bucked out, Schmitt. We've got you hog-tied—by yore own story. These gentlemen heard you tell about how

you killed Mason an' Flagg an'—Curtis Ballard. They saw you take three hundred to kill Mitch. Maybe you'd like to know my real name. It's Clay Ballard. I'm a son of the man you murdered."

The bad man looked at this brown youth whose hard eyes were so coldly implacable, and the heart died under his ribs. He was lost. He felt himself shivering under the shadow of the gallows.

"I was jest foolin' you," he whined. "Jes' loadin' you to see would you take a josh."

"You can tell that story to the judge an' jury."

"I wasn't anywheres near the Baker River country when yore father was shot. Come to that, he was killed accidental while he was out huntin'."

"That sounds to me," Caleb McCoy said with a malicious grin. "You made yore brags onct too often. You've done bragged a rope around yore neck."

"I can prove an alibi," Schmitt pleaded, beads of perspiration on his clammy forehead. "Gents, you've got the wrong man. I'm—I'm one of these gabby fellows that blow to hear themselves talk."

"Jest a big windbag, eh?" McCoy suggested.

"You know how cowboys are, gents—how they get to runnin' on one thing an' another, joshin' to pass the time, as you might say." Schmitt looked from one to another, hoping to find some grain of comfort in their faces. "Lying like the Watsons—spinnin' a yarn to cod the other fellow. That's me. A fool habit I got. What

say we all go to the Silver Palace an'—an' talk it over? Drinks on me. Fair enough, eh?"

"You're going to jail," Clay said coldly. "An' from there you're going to trial. You an' Cole both."

"You can't prove a thing against me—not a thing."

"Then you'll be riding pretty," Clay said.

McCoy limped across the room and shook a fist in the face of the bad man. His faded old eyes had come to life. "No, sir, we can't prove a thing—except that you confessed to three murders an' took pay to do a fourth, that you were seen ridin' hell-for-leather down Elk Creek two hours after you shot Curtis Ballard, that you were known to be busted a week before the killing an' showed up in Cheyenne three days after it with a roll like a hog's leg an' bragged how you'd earned it by being a good shot. Mighty soon we'll know if you or Jas Cole or both were registered at the Windsor Hotel in Denver, an' if not there in what one. We've got you faded now, an' we aim to get him."

Clay spoke guilefully. "No, I don't reckon we'll be able to stick Cole. He's guilty as hell, of course, but he'll slide out an' let Schmitt here hang for both of 'em. Cole is a slick proposition. When the smoke has all cleared away you'll see him doing business at the old stand. I wouldn't wonder but what he'll do the hanging, since he's sheriff, if that's the law in this neck of the woods."

The hired killer looked at him, startled, his jaw fallen. He was no actor, and the thought that had jumped to

his mind could be read on his face like the words of a printed page. He was trapped, but Cole would escape. Could he save himself by betraying the sheriff?

Clay watched his eyes, finding in them fear, cunning, doubt, suspicion, and at last bravado. The young man knew he had missed a complete confession by a hair's breadth. The fellow had remembered that he would be taken to a jail of which Cole had the keys. His accomplice would give him a chance to break out and leave the country. That last comforting thought had sealed his lips.

CHAPTER XXV

Checkmated

CLAY knew that he must move swiftly, that he must have his cards stacked before the sheriff heard of what was afoot. Moreover, he must himself be the driving force of the attack. Lyons and Hayes and McCoy would support him with their moral influence, but it would take more than that to defeat a ruthless foe like Cole.

He sent for De Castro and told him the story.

"Will you take this man to jail an' keep him there to-night without letting him talk with anybody?" he asked.

"I'll do that," the deputy promised.

"He'll want you to send for Cole right away," Clay said, looking straight at the officer.

The deputy grinned understandingly. "Whyfor should I disturb Jas this late because some scalawag wants to see him?" he inquired. "If this rooster wants to try to beg himself outa jail he can do it as well to-morrow as to-night, don't you reckon?"

After De Castro and his prisoner had departed Dr. Hayes drew Clay to one side.

"A lady called at my office to-night," he said. "I'll

tell you the facts and mention no names. She wanted a certain paper in the possession of the coroner. That is, she figured he might have it."

"Did he have it?" Clay asked.

"Maybe he did. At any rate, she now has a copy of that paper. The original, she claims, is in the handwriting of a certain party I'll not mention."

"The paper suggested a time for certain other parties to keep an appointment," guessed Clay.

"Something like that. You might see her and ask about it. My understanding is that the whole thing is a secret as far as my part in it goes."

"Much obliged, Doctor. You'll be protected if possible."

Clay spoke quietly. His wooden face told no tales of a heart singing because of a woman's devotion to his cause. Almost casually, it seemed, he dismissed the subject for another one.

"We'd better see Judge Harden and the county attorney," he said. "I don't know the legal procedure, but we've got to get some kind of warrant for Cole's arrest."

"Have you considered who is to serve that warrant?" Lyons asked dryly.

"Let's get the order for his arrest first," Clay said. "Probably any officer can serve it."

"Can. But will he? I wouldn't enjoy serving that paper on Cole," the mining man replied.

"There's a man for every job," Clay said cheerfully. "Likely he'll show up when the time comes."

They found the county attorney playing poker at McCabe's Bar. With some difficulty Lyons and McCoy induced him to leave his stack of chips to hold the seat while they told him the story of the night's developments.

"I'm not going to have a thing to do with it," he said decisively as soon as he heard the story. "In the first place, I don't believe this Schmitt was telling the truth. In the second place, I'm not looking for trouble with Jasper Cole and don't intend to have any. That's final."

Clay had joined them in the shadow of the building.

"You'll not refuse to go talk it over with Judge Harden?" he objected.

"Oh, I'll talk it over with him," the lawyer said impatiently. "But I tell you now that's as far as I'll go."

Judge Harden had to be called out of bed. He listened silently to what was told him. Like the county attorney he was very reluctant to move against the sheriff. He sat on a sofa, thin shanks showing beneath a nightgown, and passed opinion.

"This fellow Schmitt was very drunk, I understand you to say. Later he repudiated the story. The word of an intoxicated man cannot be given as much weight as that of a sober one. I am not going to pass judgment on whether Schmitt committed these crimes. Very possibly he did. But on such evidence I can't assume

that a reputable citizen such as Cole is guilty of inciting to murder. You can see for yourselves it wouldn't do, gentlemen."

"You are probably right, Judge," assented Lyons. "Understand, please, the position of Dr. Hayes and myself. We had no reason to suppose this man Schmitt was going to implicate Sheriff Cole. He may have been lying, as he later said he was. That's not the point. It was clearly our duty to lay the facts before you. This we have done. That clears our skirts."

"Precisely," the judge agreed. "Now I think I'll go back to bed."

Clay did not insist. He knew when he was beaten, and already he was considering in his mind how best to shift the attack. He had failed, at least until he could gather more evidence, in tying up Cole closely enough with the death of his father to force even an arrest. But there was another crime as to which he had more direct evidence to offer.

"Where can I find you an hour from now?" he asked Dr. Hayes as soon as they were alone.

"Anywhere that suits you. Say at my office. Or would you rather not come down town?"

"It doesn't matter," Clay said. "I'm out in the open now. Inside of an hour Cole will know I'm in town and am tryin' to get him for my father's death. Right away he'll be after my scalp. All right, Doctor. See you in yore office inside of an hour."

He turned and strode swiftly away. Hayes watched his figure fade into the darkness. There was something strong and ruthless and purposeful in that stride. He was glad he was not Cole. No bloodhound would follow a trail more doggedly than this brown man who had set himself to run down his father's murderers.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Unjust Judge Gets His Reward

CLAY tapped on the bedroom window. Instantly a voice, the voice of Janice, made answer.

"Who is it?"

"Clay. I must see you. It is important."

"Go to the back door. I'll be there in a moment."

It was scarcely longer than that before she opened to him. "Come in," she said, and she gave him her hand to lead him through the kitchen.

In the parlor she lit a lamp. Over her nightgown she had thrown a wrap. Her bare feet were in slippers.

"What is it?" she asked.

He told her what had taken place during the past two hours.

"Then he knows by now you're in town—the sheriff, I mean. Jelks would tell him at once."

Jelks was the county attorney.

"I felt sure he would. Janice, I must have that letter Cole wrote to Hard. I knew Dr. Hayes wouldn't give it to me. But he'll give it to you. I made an appointment to meet him at his office. Can you go with me—now?"

"Yes. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to see Harden again. If you say it's Cole's handwriting he'll have to order his arrest, or make Jelks do it."

"Perhaps," she admitted doubtfully. "But who would arrest him?"

His answer was noncommittal. "We'll find a man."

"You mean yourself!" she cried at once.

"Oh, someone," he evaded. "That doesn't matter now."

A tremor ran through her body. Beneath her gown he glimpsed the outline of her bosom and saw the deep rise and fall of it. The delicate penetrating fragrance of her personality was like wine in his nostrils.

"No—no—no! Not you!" she protested, her hands fluttering out to hold and keep him.

He took the fine tapering fingers in his firm grip and looked into her troubled eyes. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, my dear. Remember this: I can't be in more danger from him than I am now. He means to destroy me if he can. The bold course is the safe one. If I show him I'm afraid of him I'm lost. First off, let us get that letter. I mean to show him up, to strip him of the safeguard of a friendly public opinion."

Argument would not move him. She saw that and instantly surrendered.

"I'll dress," she said.

He saw her vanish into the bedroom, swift and eager, slim beautiful limbs modeled in the moonlight against the white gown. So Diana the Huntress must have moved when the world was young.

In a few minutes she was beside him again, soft eyes shining into his. "I'm ready," she told him.

Through the night they walked to the office of Dr. Hayes. It was the first time he had tried to match his steps to hers. The nearness of the woman he loved, sweet and supple and mysterious, mounted to his head. It came to him that life was meant to be a dear adventure like this and that poor blundering humans muddle away their chances.

Dr. Hayes was waiting for them. He gave Janice the smile omniscient. "I expected you," he said.

"Then you know what we want."

"Yes."

"And you'll give it to us?"

He took the letter from his pocketbook and handed it to Mrs. Gregg. She was astonished at the ease of their victory.

"I'm the unjust judge," he said. "I wouldn't have given it to your friend, but I give it to you."

Gayly she smiled. "Even unjust judges must have their reward," she replied, and leaning forward she kissed him on the lips.

The sandy-haired little doctor blushed. Never in an emotionally arid lifetime had a woman so beautiful

given him such largess of her charm. He tried to meet lightly her friendly audacity.

"I haven't another letter you'd like, have I?" he challenged.

A laugh welled from her throat. "Not to-night, Doctor. But you're getting on. I'm revising my opinion of you."

"I have the most stimulating teacher in the world," he explained gallantly.

Before leaving, Clay asked Dr. Hayes a question. "Who is mayor of Bonanza?"

"My friend Ben Lyons."

"Could you fix it so as to make me a deputy marshal for a while?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'd want to do that. You're looking for legal support in your fight against the sheriff, I suppose."

"I'd like to be sure we've got officers here that will arrest criminals no matter who they are," Clay said.

"Yes, but it's one particular criminal you want to arrest," Hayes retorted. "I believe in law enforcement, but I don't want to turn that department of our local government over to feudists. We've had enough of that sort of thing already. Jasper Cole paints a moral. No, I won't help you to get appointed a deputy marshal."

Janice drew a deep breath of relief. She did not want *her* man given the job of arresting Jasper Cole.

CHAPTER XXVII

Guns Blaze

JANICE and Clay did not return to her home by way of Main Street. She did not want him to pass the lighted saloons and gambling houses where the night life of Bonanza was exuberantly roaring. There they would be seen, perhaps by Cole, certainly by those who would tell him.

Before they had gone fifty yards Janice caught at her lover's arm and stopped. Three men were coming down the street toward them. Her heart turned over in her bosom. One of the men was talking, and the voice that carried to her was that of Jasper Cole.

"What'll we do?" she whispered, terror in her throat.

"I'll see 'em. You cross the street and run," he said.

"No. If we both ran——"

It was too late. He could not go now, even if he had wanted to escape the meeting. Janice was fortunately on his left side. His right arm was free for action if necessary. The two men with the sheriff were Cash Schmitt and the county attorney Jelks. He dismissed Jelks from his mind.

With a startled oath Schmitt stopped in his stride. "It's him!" he cried.

The man was less disturbed by divided impulses than either the sheriff or Clay. Both of these were hampered by the presence of Janice. Clay's primary thought was that he must protect her, must say or do nothing to start trouble while she was with him. The sight of her beside his enemy shocked Cole, overrode for the moment at least the rage that would have blazed instantly into action. What was she doing there? Was she in love with the man? Had she allied herself with his foes?

The raucous voice of Schmitt carried on. With Cole beside him he could safely give way to his anger. "Thought you'd framed me, fellow, didn't you? Figured I had no friends an' you could railroad me to the gallows? Well, it's you an' me now, an' I aim to settle all scores right damn here. You're a dead rooster an' you'll crow no more. Ain't that right, Jas?"

Clay spoke sharply, biting off his words: "Don't draw that gun, Schmitt."

The big ruffian was taken aback by the curt command ringing in the young man's words. He temporized.

"Fellow, don't tell me what——"

Cole interrupted hoarsely: "What are you doing here, Janice?" he asked, his eyes not on her but on his enemy.

"Mr. Ballard is taking me home," she said tremulously.

"Where from? Why?"

"I'll explain that to you, Mr. Cole, if you'll meet me here in half an hour—after I have seen Mrs. Gregg home." Clay's words, low and clear, carried an undercurrent of meaning quite plain to all present. He would let his blazing gun talk for him if the sheriff would wait until Janice was out of danger.

Jelks had edged out into the middle of the road. He spoke for the first time rapidly, his tone pitched high. "No trouble here, gentlemen, if you please. There's a lady present. Don't forget that."

Clay could not watch closely both the sheriff and his accomplice. Cole was the more dangerous of the two, a better shot than Schmitt and no less treacherous. On the other hand, he would be less likely to start firing with Janice present.

The sheriff spoke again: "I'll take that offer. Meet you here in half an hour and settle this thing."

For an instant the young man's eyes shifted to those of Cole. In that instant Schmitt's fear and rage exploded into action. A six-shooter flashed out.

Janice gave a startled cry and flung herself on the breast of her lover to protect him. A moment she clung to him, body rigid, then she seemed to sink into herself and relax. Clay knew she had been shot.

He carried her into a doorway and laid her down on the

step. As he did so he heard the roar of Schmitt's gun. He turned, possessed by a cold hate that devoured him. No fear was in him; for the moment even his anxiety for Janice yielded to the primal impulse to kill. He had a thing to do, a reptile to grind under his heel.

Out of the shadow of the building he came, short sharp flashes darting at him. He knew that Cole's gun was in action, too, and he paid not the least attention to the most feared killer in the state. A flame of pain seared his flesh. He scarcely noticed it. For his .45, too, was spitting fire. Tigerlike he padded forward, crouched, terrible, implacable, moving straight toward Schmitt and the six-shooter stabbing at him. That deadly weapon no more stopped him than a toy pistol would have done.

Schmitt cried out to Cole, the shriek of fear in his voice: "Get him, Jas. God's sake, get him."

The man had been giving ground, firing as he retreated. His crooked finger pulled the trigger on an empty cartridge. He turned to run, and the avenger pumped bullets into him. Schmitt stumbled over his own foot and his heavy body crashed to the ground. It rolled over, then lay inert.

Clay turned toward Cole. Once more he moved forward, as slowly and as surely as doom. Another shot reached him, this time in his left shoulder. It did not stop him. It did not even break his stride. In front of him was the snarling face of his foe. He saw nothing

else. He was not aware that from windows, from flat adobe roofs, from partly opened doorways, the fascinated eyes of men and women watched him. The slap of running feet, the cries of excited voices, did not reach his ears. The job was not yet done.

Nothing could stop him. He was blood-crazy. Lost to mind was the code he had preached to his brother. Vengeance! A life for a life! Revolver empty, he plunged forward, head down, like a football tackler. Bullets flew above him in the darkness.

Reaching fingers clutched at the lapel of the sheriff's coat. Cole felt beneath his armpit for a second gun and dragged it out. Already the barrel of Clay's .45 was crashing down on his head. It fell a second time, and Cole went out of consciousness as his body slid from the clutch of his enemy.

The blood-madness passed. With surprise Clay saw men appearing cautiously in the street. He moved through them, speaking no word, to the doorway where he had put Janice. Stooping, he picked her up in his arms and carried her down the street to the office of Dr. Hayes.

Drawn by the firing and by the crowd, the doctor was already hurrying to the scene. At sight of Clay he stopped, turned, and flung open the door of his office. From a couch he swept a litter of books and newspapers. Clay lowered the body of his sweetheart.

Long lashes fluttered open. Janice looked at him. She spoke feebly.

"They didn't—hurt you?"

"No." His voice broke in a sob. "My dear."

Hayes took charge. He gave brisk staccato orders while he cut away the dress around the wound. Clay flew to obey them, as though her life depended on the swiftness with which he served the surgeon.

They heard the shuffling of feet, the sound of low murmurs, of spoken words. Clay stepped to the door. Men were carrying the body of Schmitt to the doctor.

The young man barred the way. His face was like a day of judgment, his orders harsh. He scarcely recognized his own voice.

"Take him somewhere else—not here," he said.

The cowboy Freckles was one of those helping with Schmitt. "He's damn whistlin' right, boys. This is no place for the yellow wolf, where the lady he shot is. We'll take him to Doc Lea's."

Someone flung out a bitter epithet at the stricken man, adding that they would hang him if he had killed Mrs. Gregg. Clay saw to his surprise that the last speaker was the brown cowboy, Bob Field, whom he had seen at Salt Springs with Schmitt.

Clay shut the door and returned to the couch. He stood anxiously back of the doctor. His very presence asked a question he did not put into words.

"She has a chance," Hayes said in a low voice after he had done what he could. "I can't be sure, one way or the other yet." He explained in medical terms where the bullet had struck and what complications were possible.

The two men stood in the corner of the room farthest from the couch where she lay with her eyes closed.

A knock sounded on the door. It opened, and Ben Lyons came in.

"She is alive and has a chance," Hayes told him. "We must move her to her own house. We'll carry her on a cot. Get some men to help you, Ben."

Lyons left swiftly to make the necessary arrangements.

The appeal in Clay's tortured eyes leaped for the first time into words. "Save her, Doc. Save her for me."

Hayes started to answer him, but stopped abruptly. A red wet stain showed on the shoulder of Clay's coat.

"Take off your coat and shirt," he ordered curtly.

The lips of the young man were white. "I'm—all right," he said. "Don't bother about me. Look after Janice."

To prove his assertion he slumped down into a chair and drooped over its back, his arm falling laxly toward the floor.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Cole Plays Safe

NEITHER of Clay's wounds was serious. He had collapsed from loss of blood, but within forty-eight hours he was on his feet again, pushing the campaign against Cole.

From every point of view the street encounter had weakened the position of the sheriff. He had lost ground with the public, with Janice, and with himself. Schmitt's first wild shot, from the effects of which Janice was now lying in the valley of the shadow of death, had been disastrously unfortunate for Cole. It put him in the rôle of a killer ready to sacrifice a woman if she stood in the way of his vengeance. That he had not fired the weapon himself was held to be no excuse. Why had he freed a man who had just confessed to cold-blooded murder? A whisper of the truth was running through the town. Moreover, Janice was widely popular, even though she lived under a cloud. Why must she fall a victim to Jasper Cole's mania for killing?

For the first time in many years the sheriff's confidence in his star was shaken. Even if Janice lived she would be through with him. That was one blow that

staggered him. He had lost her, perhaps to his rival, this young Clay Ballard who had stridden so starkly across his path. To a man of such thin-skinned vanity as Cole this was gall in his throat. And his pride smarted from other lashes to his self-conceit. Before the eyes of the public whom the sheriff had awed, Ballard had outfought and outgamed him. He tried to blot out from mind the fact that he had been backing away from his enemy when the barrel of the man's empty Colt had struck him down. It was easy enough to explain this to himself. Why should he not avoid the fellow's onset until he could drag out a weapon with which to finish him? But Bonanza would not look at it that way. What Bonanza saw was an unarmed man moving intrepidly down a lane of death to overpower a gunman notorious as a killer even on the fighting frontier. Cole knew that he had lost caste it would be impossible for him ever to recover.

Even this was not the worst of his troubles. Cash Schmitt was still alive. It was possible that he would get well, badly wounded though he was. With the rat instinct for deserting a sinking ship the fellow would tell all he knew. Evidence would be dug up to corroborate what he confessed. Cole felt that there would be no safety for him now as long as Schmitt was alive.

There was no hospital in Bonanza. The wounded bad man had been taken back to jail and put in a room downstairs occasionally used by Cole himself. His mind

had not yet recovered lucidity, but whether he lived or died there would very likely come an hour when it would clear. That hour would be dangerous for Cole.

As he moved about the town Cole was aware of a change in its attitude toward him. Outwardly men still paid him respect. He was too dangerous to offend. But he had a curious sense of having been weighed and found wanting. There was nothing he could put a name to, nothing he could attack and defeat. None the less, this intangible criticism of him existed.

A friend came to him with a piece of news.

"Heard the latest, Sheriff?"

"I'll tell you when you let me know what it is," Cole said harshly. His instinct told him it was bad news against which he must brave himself.

"This young Ballard has been appointed city marshal. Lounsbery has resigned."

"Appointed when?" asked Cole.

"This aft. About half an hour ago. Special meeting of the city dads."

"Why?"

"Search *me*. I got no idea why. Thought maybe you'd like to know." The man looked at Cole with veiled insolence. He was not sorry to see the sheriff's comb cut. He had ruled the roost, and ruled it arrogantly, long enough.

The cold eyes of the sheriff, unfathomable as jade, daunted the man. For a moment he was in a panic lest

that taunting look had brought trouble to his door. But Cole did not press any resentment he might feel.

"Nothing to me," he said, and turned on his heel.

But it was a good deal to him. He was like a prize fighter who has just taken a jarring body blow over the heart and cannot return it. The opposition was gathering head, was coming out into the open. A week ago the mayor and the town council would not have dared affront him so. The appointment of young Ballard marked the measure of the change in sentiment that had swept the community. It was a direct attack. Those who in the years past had been offended by his effrontery and his hardihood were massed behind this youngster. If they could gather more evidence about the killing of Curt Ballard it might go hard with him.

He must move fast. Not for a moment did he doubt what he intended to do. After one swift summary of the situation his mind was made up.

Darkness was falling over the town when he slipped by an inconspicuous alley down into the bed of Dry Creek. He was careful not to follow the sandy wash, but to walk along the rocks which bordered the edge, pushing his way cautiously through the willow bushes. It was very important that he should not be seen.

The shadowy wall of the jail loomed up in front of him. He crept furtively along it to a boulder rooted in the ground below a window. Upon this he stood, raising his head until he could look into the room. There was a

cot in the room, just opposite the casement. A man lay on the bed, the wounded killer Schmitt. The eyes of the sheriff swept the apartment. The nurse had gone out for some reason, but she might return any minute.

What had to be done for his safety the sheriff did quickly. He fired twice, stepped down from the rock, and vanished in the darkness.

Swiftly he retraced his way up Dry Creek, still treading the rocks along the bank rather than the sandy bed. He did not intend to leave any well-defined footprints to betray him. Once he stopped, to eject the cartridges from his .44, to clean the barrel of the weapon with a rod and a cloth he drew from his pocket, and to reload the two empty chambers. With his toe he kicked a hole in the dry sand. In that hole he buried the shells that had been fired and the rag with which he had removed the powder stains. This done, he scooped sand into the hole and smoothed the surface carefully.

Five minutes later he sauntered into the Silver Palace. Though he had a manager for the house it was his custom about this time to drop in every night and stay an hour or so. He had not been here since the shooting affray with Clay Ballard. There were two long wheals on his cheek where the barrel of a revolver had crashed down on him, and his inordinate vanity had kept him from making so public an exhibition of his defeat. But the reason that had brought him here now was more potent than the one which had kept him

away. He wanted to establish an alibi. Except for a short space of ten minutes he had been under the observation of witnesses for the past two hours.

As he passed among the crowd, carrying himself with the stiff erectness that distinguished him, he knew that the eyes of men and women followed him curiously. Those eyes observed his disfigured face. He knew that the owners of them were thinking about the recent street battle. They were appraising him, wondering if at last he had met more than his match. No expression on the sheriff's cold, immobile face betrayed him, conveyed to those watchers the chaotic turmoil of his thoughts.

To one and another he spoke with the close-lipped curtness he affected. Reaching the manager, he had a murmured conversation with him about the proceeds of the previous day.

Bob Field passed the small railed rostrum which served for an office. He nodded casually to Cole.

"How are the invalids, Sheriff?" he asked.

"What invalids?" demanded Cole harshly.

"First off, I had in mind Mrs. Gregg," the cowboy said.

"You had better ask Dr. Hayes."

"I did, this aft. He said she was mighty sick. Thought maybe you had later news."

"No, I haven't," Cole added grudgingly, as though the admission were forced out of him, a man not accustomed to make public his feelings. "I'd give ten

thousand dollars to know she was safe. Whoever shot her, Cash Schmitt or this Ballard, ought to be strung up to a telegraph pole."

The deep blue eyes of the long-bodied brown man looked straight into the black beaded orbs of the sheriff. "There's no question about who shot her, do you reckon? Not Ballard, anyhow."

"Can't be sure. It all came so quick. He was hiding behind her so Cash wouldn't plug him. Then both of them got to firing."

"When I saw him he wasn't hidin' behind anything but his gun," Field said acidly. "If you ask me, I never saw anyone so cool an' so game."

"After he knew Cash had emptied his gun."

"Before an' after an' all the time. He's one sure-enough man tamer, an' I'll bet my boots he makes a jim-dandy marshal."

Three or four men had stopped and were listening. There was no profit for Cole in such talk. He could not shoot down Field, because the man had the hardihood to voice an opinion that was general in the town. That would be fatal just now.

The sheriff stabbed a fierce look at the cowboy and shrugged his shoulders with pretended indifference. "Everybody is entitled to an opinion. That's yours, Field. You're quite a pal of Schmitt, I hear, and I reckon you're trying to square yourself for being his friend. Maybe you can put it over. You're probably

claiming that this fellow Ballard is straight. Different here. I claim he's one bad hombre all the way through. That goes as it lays. I'd as lief say it to him as to you."

Joe de Castro came hurriedly into the Silver Palace. His eyes swept around the room. Of a miner just leaving he asked whether he had seen the sheriff.

"He's here now. Over there." The man lifted a hand toward the back of the room.

The deputy pushed through the crowd of dancers toward his chief. A girl caught at his sleeve.

"Dance, Mr. de Castro?"

He shook his head, circling around a quadrille.

"Do-se-do. Alemane left. Swing yore pardners," the caller shouted.

The floor resounded to the sound of shuffling feet. Fiddles squawked. The rattle of chips could be heard when for a moment the dancers waited for the caller's instructions.

As soon as he was near enough to Cole the deputy spilled excitedly his news: "Schmitt has been shot."

The sheriff frowned. "Of course he's been shot. What d'you mean?"

"I mean now—ten minutes ago. Shot through the window while the nurse was out."

"Who did it?"

"Don't know. The fellow lit out."

"What about Schmitt?"

'Dead. Drilled through the heart."

The muscles stood out like ropes in the jaws of the sheriff's set face. He stood frowning in silent thought while a babble of voices rose from those about him. When at last he spoke it was to answer a question asked by Jimmie May: "Who could have done it?"

Cole gave opinion bluntly and instantly. "Any fool can answer that. He had one enemy in this town. Why look farther?"

"Meanin' young Ballard?" the fat hotel man asked.

"Meaning Ballard."

Joe de Castro neither assented nor denied. "Maybe so. Better wait till the evidence is in."

"What evidence?" Cole asked harshly. "Do you think he'd do it when anyone was looking? Who hated him most? Who'd been shot by him only two days ago? Who claimed Cash Schmitt killed his father?"

Bob Field spoke: "No regrets, far as I'm concerned. If Ballard bumped him off, I say good riddance. Just the same I reckon he didn't do it. This young fellow is an out-in-the-open guy. Might have been anybody did it. A hundred fellows in this town were sore at the yellow wolf. Any one of a dozen might have done it."

"Had he had any trouble with any of this hundred you're trying to alibi Ballard with?" Cole asked sharply.

"Maybe not, but I've heard plenty roosters say in the past two days he ought to be put outa business."

"That's whatever," agreed May.

"Talking and shooting are different things," Cole

said impatiently. "Find the man with the motive, I say. Well, we've found him, and if you weren't all bent on making a little tin angel out of this wolf Ballard you'd say so yourselves. Come on, Joe. I'll go down to the jail with you."

The sheriff looked fiercely around at the men who differed with him, then stalked out of the house followed by his deputy.

CHAPTER XXIX

A Country Boy Comes to Town

UNDER cover of darkness a young man rode into Bonanza. He swung down from the saddle in an inconspicuous alley and tied his horse to a young cottonwood.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked himself cheerfully, speaking aloud after the manner of men who live much alone in the open. "I'll be doggoned if I know. Expect I'd better sashay around the outskirts of the burg kinda careful. By what Clay says it's no healthy place for me."

He walked down the alley and crossed the street, intending to turn away from the beckoning bright lights to the left. A man came around the corner of a building and met him face to face. He was a long-bodied brown man with blue eyes.

"'Lo, Mitch," he said. "Ain't you kinda off yore range?"

"'Lo, Bob. Some, I reckon. I got a brother here, an' I got something to tell him."

Bob Field grinned. "You've sure enough got a brother here, Mitch. He's one hell-a-miler, that boy is. There every way from the ace."

"You know Clay?"

"By reputation an' sight only."

"Reputation? Howcome, Bob?"

"This whole town is buzzin' about him. You don't mean you ain't heard?"

"Heard what? I just got in two-three minutes ago. Spill yore news."

"Well, if you want to know he had a gunfight with Jas Cole an' a buzzard called Cash Schmitt. Cleaned up the two of 'em."

The eyes of Mitchell Ballard gleamed with light. "You mean—killed 'em?"

"No, sir. He didn't kill either one or the other, but he sure left his brand on 'em. They had to carry Schmitt to bed on a shutter, shot up so bad he was a mighty sick man. All yore kid brother did to Cole was to work him over so his friends, if he's got any, hardly know him. Some thorough, that boy."

"Clay hurt any?"

"Yep. Got a couple o' pills somewheres, but they didn't even stop him. I notice he's around again."

"Where is he?"

"He's stoppin' at old man McCoy's—down by the river."

"Take me to him. I got word that Schmitt was here an' I drifted to town to let Clay know. I reckon I'm a mite late."

"Far as Schmitt is concerned you're certainly late,

Mitch. Someone bumped him off half an hour ago. Shot him through the window while he was lying in bed."

"Who?" Mitchell asked, astonished.

"Yore guess is as good as mine. He didn't leave no callin' card."

"You don't think Clay——"

The sentence hung suspended in air, but its meaning was clear.

"No, I don't," answered Field. "Clay ain't that kind of a pilgrim, I wouldn't think. I've got another notion, but not a thing to back it but suspicion."

"I'm listenin', Bob."

"You go right on listenin' far as I'm concerned. I'm not offerin' any opinions."

"I'd of liked a crack at that skunk Schmitt my own self," Mitchell said. "The dirty cuss bushwhacked my father."

"Hmp! I wouldn't say that out loud if I was you. You sure arrived right prompt after he was got. Better dead is my verdict. Still an' all, there was no open season even on Cash Schmitt."

"I didn't do it, Bob, if that's what you are shootin' at."

"I didn't say you did. I don't think it. But you'll admit you dropped into town mighty simultaneous."

"Well, lead me to Clay, an' if you're agreeable we won't parade Main Street."

"Don't know this town?" Field asked.

"I've been here before, but I didn't stay long."

"Well, you got a good idea about not showin' up on Main Street. I wouldn't sashay past the Silver Palace if I was you unless I was proof against buckshot. You favor yore brother in looks too much."

"Having Cole in yore mind, I reckon," Mitchell said.

"Having Cole in my mind," Field agreed.

Ballard's eyes were steely and his face grim. "I never met him but once, an' I was in some hurry then. Probably I wouldn't know him, but I'd certainly like to make his acquaintance. An' I aim to do so soon."

"Wishin' you a lot of luck when you do, Mitch," the cowboy said. "He ain't noways popular with me. Fact is, he's in Dutch with most folks right now, account of Schmitt having shot Mrs. Gregg."

Mitchell Ballard stopped in his stride. "What? Shot Mrs. Gregg, did you say?"

"That's what the skunk did. He was shootin' at yore brother an' she got in front of him somehow."

"Did he—kill her?"

"She's still alive. Somehow I feel she's gonna make the riffle. Mrs. Gregg is so much alive I can't figure her dead. It don't look reasonable. Doc thinks it's a fifty-fifty bet if none of these here complications start. You know how docs always alibi themselves."

"Mrs. Gregg saved my life once," Mitchell blurted out.

"She did? Never heard of that. When?"

"It don't matter when. Only—Bob, I'd jump in the river an' drown if it would do that little lady any good."

"You ain't the only one feels that way. This town ain't wearin' mourning any because Cash Schmitt got bumped off, an' there wouldn't be no general regrets if Jas Cole handed in his checks."

"How does Cole come into it?"

"Yore brother got a confession out of Cash about killin' yore father an' had him arrested. When Cole heard of it he turned the fellow loose. They were together when they met Clay an' Mrs. Gregg. Cash started to smoke up an', like I said, hit Mrs. Gregg. Then Cole chipped in. He's as popular around here as a coyote is with a sheep herder."

At Field's knock Marigold opened the door of the McCoy house. When she saw Mitchell Ballard the girl gave a little exclamation of astonishment.

"My name is Ballard," he began. "I heard my brother was . . ."

The words died out on his tongue. He had been for the moment struck dumb. For he recognized her now. She was the girl he had covered with a six-shooter inside the Cattlemen's Bank.

"Your brother is here. Won't you—come in?"

She stood aside in the passage, her big brown eyes fixed on him. He hesitated, uncertain what to do. Then, with an apparent determination to see it through, he moved past her to the room beyond.

His brother Clay and old Caleb McCoy were seated in front of a fireplace. The buffalo hunter took the pipe from his wrinkled mouth and stared at Mitchell.

"What are you doing here?" Clay asked.

"I came to warn you Cash Schmitt was in town. Seems I'm some late."

"I've met him," Clay admitted.

"You shot up much, boy?" the elder brother asked, looking at the bandaged shoulder.

Clay shook his head despondently. Despair shadowed his eyes. Day and night his thoughts were with the woman he loved, the woman who had perhaps given her life to save his. He haunted the house where she lay. He paced restlessly to and fro outside, waiting with a heavy heart for news. Old Caleb McCoy had with difficulty persuaded him to leave long enough to get food. Already his unquiet troubled fears were urging him to get back to his beat.

"No. A scratch. Nothing at all." He waved aside his wounds as of no importance.

"You look like you'd been dragged through a knothole," his brother said, laying a hand on the unwounded shoulder.

"He won't eat. He won't sleep. He just walks up an' down, up an' down, outside the house where Mrs. Gregg is. He's probably got a high fever right now. If he doesn't look out he'll be worse than she is." This

from Marigold, with the sharpness of young anxiety in her voice.

"No sense in acting thataway, Clay," his brother remonstrated. "Mrs. Gregg won't get better any quicker because you worry yoreself sick."

Clay answered, to himself rather than to them, his hopeless eyes staring into the fireplace, "It was my fault. I took her with me to get that paper. Why did I do it?"

"Because you weren't thinking of danger for her, of course," Marigold said. "It wasn't your fault at all. That's just silly."

Bob Field interrupted to tell his news. "Anyhow, Cash Schmitt has got his. Someone killed him half an hour ago—shot him through the jail window while he lay in bed."

Clay jumped to his feet. "What? What's that?"

"Like I'm tellin' you. Joe de Castro just brought the news to the Silver Palace. Cole hinted it was you did it. Got an alibi?"

Marigold spoke quickly, out of the fear that this new development shook up in her. "Half an hour ago! Why, Mr. Ballard has been here 'most that long, an' before that——"

"I've been with him more'n an hour," the old ex-buffalo hunter said.

"Glad to hear it," Field replied. "Cash needed killing.

No argument about that. All the same, I'm pleased Ballard here didn't do it. Not that I thought for a minute you did. Didn't seem like you to shoot down a wounded unarmed man without givin' him a chance for his white alley."

Clay looked at his brother. That long look asked a question his lips did not frame.

Mitchell shook his head. "No, sir. I wasn't even in town when it happened." A flare of bitter anger leaped to his eyes. "Not but what I'd ought to have done it. Why did I let you talk me out of it? Why didn't I do like I wanted to an' meet the dirty wolf with smoking guns? That's the way it should of been. But you had to have it yore own way. See what's come of it."

The younger Ballard lifted and dropped a despairing hand. "I wish to God we'd gone after the two of 'em, law or no law."

McCoy shook his head. "No, boy, you did right. This that's happened to Mrs. Gregg couldn't have been foreseen. An' she's gonna make the grade, too. You heard what Doc said just before we left her house. She's doing fine. Ain't she, Marigold?"

The girl nodded her head vigorously. "Yes, she is. Rebecca says so, an' she's an awful good nurse."

"What you want to do is to get a holt on yoreself an' quit moonin' around. The way you're actin' now Cole could shoot seventeen holes in yore hide before you knew he was around. That's so, too. Ain't it, Marigold?"

"Yes, it is," the girl agreed. "I'm scared every time he leaves the house. And now they've made him marshal, another piece of foolishness."

"Made him marshal?" Mitchell repeated. "What in time for?"

"To arrest Jasper Cole," the girl cried. "Oh, I know. Nobody tells me anything, but I've got ears. He'll fool around until he gets killed."

"If you're marshal I'm yore deputy, Clay," the elder Ballard said.

Clay shook his head. "Neither you nor anybody else, Mitch. I'm playin' a lone hand."

"Yes, you are *not*. You've played ned with yore lone-hand stuff. You're nothing but my kid brother, young fellow. I won't stand for you to boss me any longer. Not any a-tall."

McCoy slapped an open palm down on the table. The eyes in his wrinkled pippin face gleamed eagerly. "I know who killed this Schmitt. It was Jas Cole his own self. You can bet yore boots on that, boys. He was scared the fellow would squawk on him. An' why wouldn't he be? That's sure what he would of done soon as his head came clear. Yes, sirree. Cole shot him to get rid of evidence that might of hung him."

"I've been thinkin' just that ever since I heard Schmitt was shot," Bob Field said quietly. "It's got all the earmarks of a Cole job."

"I'm just as sure as though I'd seen him do it," Mari-

gold agreed. "I know him. He's like that. Who else would have wanted to do it—that way?"

No doubt they were right, Clay reflected. But there would never be any evidence to prove it. Trust Jasper Cole for that.

"An' if you've got a waterproof alibi, Clay, he'll try to hang it on Mitch soon as he knows he's in town," Field predicted.

"You'll have to leave, Mitch—right away," Clay said.

Mitchell looked at his brother. "I'm gonna stay right here till this thing is settled. You need a guardeen, young fellow, an' I've appointed myself it."

"You've forgotten something. You can't stay here."

"I've forgotten nothing. I'll stay here till we're through with Jas Cole. He's figurin' on collecting yore scalp, Clay. We'll see about that."

"Best play is to go get him first," Bob said.

"I'm going to arrest him—to-night," Clay announced.

"Arrest nothing," Mitchell flung back impatiently. "This is war. An' he's my meat, not yours. Boy, you're fit only for bed. You're so jumpy now you can't hardly hold yore hand still."

"I'm going to arrest him," Clay repeated doggedly.

"What for?" McCoy asked.

"For trying to rob the Cattlemen's Bank."

"Have you got that letter?" his brother demanded.

"I've got it."

"He'll never let you arrest him."

"Then it'll be him or me, one."

"We'll see about that," Mitchell cried hotly. "I'm through standin' back an' lettin' you boss this round-up. I aim to be majordomo my own self."

"You'll keep out of it," Clay told him. "I'm marshal. It's my job. When I want help I'll ask for it."

Field touched the arm of Mitchell. "No use talkin' with him," he murmured. "He's hell-bent on having his own way. Play yore own hand, an' play it *pronto*."

Mitchell hesitated a moment, then nodded assent.

"All right. Do as you doggone please," he said aloud. "I'm only a country boy come to town. Don't pay any attention to me."

CHAPTER XXX

The Devils of Despair

OUTSIDE the door of the McCoy house the brothers separated.

"I'm going to step around by Mrs. Gregg's house to find out how she is now," Clay said. "Understand, Mitch. You're to keep outa this business. Don't start anything with Cole."

Mitchell dug his thumb into the ribs of Bob Field. It was an unobtrusive gesture of derision concealed by the darkness. "Who said anything about trouble with Cole?" he asked.

"You got no business going down town now, though I reckon he doesn't usually leave home till after this."

"I aim to get my bronc an' take it to a feed stable, boy. Can't leave it tied to a hitch rack all night, can I? Don't you worry about me, Clay. Like you say, I've got my reasons for not joinin' any parade in Bonanza. I'll be right careful. An' you look after yore own self. Cole may be layin' for you up at Mrs. Gregg's place."

Bob Field went with Mitchell. It was in his mind that if Mitch was going to start trouble with the sheriff he would like to be among those present. He might

even be induced to take a hand. Just now he did not know anybody he liked less than Jasper Cole. For Bob had once been afflicted with what Joe de Castro had dubbed Greggitis, and he still had a loyal friendship for Janice. The fact that she had gently declined to accept his devotion did not at all affect that.

The two young men walked Main and Custer streets from one end to the other. They dropped into every saloon and gambling house on the row. The sheriff was nowhere to be seen. They went to his house and found it dark.

"Where in Mexico is he?" Mitchell asked irritably. It was a nerve strain to be all primed for battle and have the occasion postponed by the absence of the other duelist.

"You tell me," Bob answered. "Unless he's hangin' around Mrs. Gregg's lookin' for Clay, like you told him."

"Might be," Mitchell assented. "We'll waltz over there right damn now."

The reasons for the nonappearance of Jasper Cole were psychological. The least important one was that it hurt his vanity to show a scarred and whealed face to any more people than he could help. He was avoiding publicity these days. A more serious one was that the devils of unrest were busy with him. He had to keep a mask over the unhappy eyes in his cold gray face to prevent them from betraying the turmoil of his soul.

Everything had gone wrong. Some ill wind had blown down the house of cards he had so laboriously built. His brooding mind rehearsed once and again the factors that went to make up the situation. The thing that had befallen him he could not understand. For years he had been master of his fate, a figure dominant and forceful, watched by all with awe and respect. Now he was being driven like a chip on the water, with no apparent control over his own destiny.

His reputation as the most dangerous fighting man in the state was in eclipse. An unknown boy without a record had come between it and the sun. The picture of himself that he had tried to build up in the public eye and to a certain extent in his own mind—the picture of a Southern gentleman, quick to defend his prestige, fearless and honorable but dangerous, with suave and polished manners presumably an inheritance from slave-holding ancestors—that, too, now lay in a heavy shadow. There had been unpleasant talk when Marigold had left him, though she and her grandfather had said little. The shooting of Mrs. Gregg had been fatal to the conception he had propagated of himself as a man of gallantry. It did not matter that he had not fired the bullet. By some ironic and damnable quirk of fate he had been put in the position of being responsible for the disaster that had brought her to death's door.

In his own passionate and possessive way he had loved Janice Gregg. The fire in him still fiercely burned.

But he had lost her. He had perhaps destroyed her. Even if she lived, this man he hated so bitterly would win the prize. The conviction of this poisoned his days. It drove him to long walks beyond the lights of the town, where in the darkness he could fling away the mask and let the white gambler's face register the vehement emotions that surged in his breast.

He was on such a walk when Mitchell Ballard and Bob Field were looking for him. Jaded in body and spent in spirit, but with nerves so wrought up that he knew sleep would not be possible that night, he turned back toward the town. From a hilltop he could see the lighted windows of the house where Janice lay delirious. They drew his unwilling footsteps. Twice a day he had sent a boy to make inquiries as to her condition, but he had judged it best not to go there himself. Yet what he wanted above all things, except the death of his enemy, was to fall down at her bedside and bow his stubborn pride to ask forgiveness. This would not be possible for him. To humble himself was not in his temperament. He was all ice outside. Nobody was to know what a boiling river of hatred, self-pity, humiliated rage, and vain regret he was behind the impassive front he showed the world.

And there was something else, an unconfessed dread back of this welter of emotion. Fear had come into his consciousness. He was afraid of the future. Clay Ballard was a rising star. He was a falling one. A bell of warning

rang in his heart. Only last night he had awakened in stark fear, beads of perspiration on his forehead, from a dream that this strong brown man was walking on his grave. Cole was a fatalist, as gamblers often are. What must be must be. A man could not step aside and dodge his fate. A fortune teller had once described the man who would end his life, and that description exactly fitted Clay Ballard.

While he stood outside the house where Janice lay, in the shadow of the lilac bushes, the front door opened, and two people came out, a man and a woman. His heart turned over, stopped, began to hammer fast. The man was his enemy, Clay Ballard.

CHAPTER XXXI

Cole Weakens

MARIGOLD walked back with Clay to the house where the patient lay. Side by side they moved in silence. She knew that for this man she did not exist. His thoughts were in the room where Janice Gregg was fighting for her life. The girl expected nothing of him. Her adoration was a humble, shy thing to be hidden from all men and from him most of all. But her heart was woe for his grief. There was this much of the mother in her, that if she could have suffered in his place she would gladly have taken the burden.

Once she spoke timidly: "The fever is going down. I know she's better."

They entered by the back door and passed through the kitchen into the parlor. Dr. Hayes came after many minutes out of the bedroom to meet them.

"She's conscious, and she wants to see you," he said to the young man. "Don't excite her. Talk to her cheerfully, a very little. Then leave the room."

"Is she better?"

"The fever is lower. I think she'll sleep. Of course

you'll not get emotional before her. That's the worst thing you could do."

Clay nodded, his throat gone suddenly dry.

He had never seen Janice so lovely. She was so still, so wan, the shadows under the long lashes so deep, that her ethereal appearance startled him. Surely that white fragility could belong only to one close to the angels. He felt his courage shaken, had to call upon his stoicism.

Faintly she smiled. The look her lifted eyes poured up to his held only love. "Don't be so—frightened," she whispered. "I'm going to live—for you."

Hope resurgent flooded his being. There is life in love.

"Yes," he told her. "I'm not afraid now. But you're not to talk. The doctor said so. You're to sleep."

"Yes," she agreed. "Only this. I love you."

"I love *you*," he answered.

"Kiss me," she said.

He kissed her.

Again she smiled drowsily. Her lashes were falling to the cheeks as he left the room.

Five minutes later Dr. Hayes tiptoed into the parlor. Noiselessly he closed the door behind him.

"She's asleep," he said. "Nothing could be better for her. While she rests the forces within her will gather strength."

"You-all had better go now," Rebecca said pointedly to Clay. Already she had more than once made it apparent that her darling would be better off without his

presence. She was jealous of him, and she resented the fact that it had been for him that Janice had been shot.

"Yes," Clay agreed, picking up his hat. He did not mind what she said or how she felt. Janice was going to live. Nothing else mattered.

Marigold went with him as far as the door. They stepped outside. She drew the door to behind her in order that their low voices might not by any chance disturb the invalid.

"I'm so glad for you," she whispered. "And for myself, too. I love her."

"She told me she was going to get well—for me," he said out of a lifted heart. "She told me not to be frightened."

Little tear wells disturbed her vision of him. "Don't mind my crying," she begged. "It's because I'm so glad—so glad."

She did not notice that Clay's body had grown rigid, that his gaze was focused on a figure crouched behind the lilacs.

"Go back into the house," he ordered.

The change in his voice startled Marigold. Fear fluttered in her bosom. Had he misunderstood her somehow? Had he thought her too bold or silly? She asked no questions but accepted the command as a reproof. Without a word she turned and went back into the house.

Instantly Clay spoke in a clear low voice that carried.

"Not here," he said. "She's just fallen asleep. It's her big chance, Hayes says."

Cole's bitter reply came across the garden to him. "Still hiding behind a woman's skirts. All right. Not here."

The sheriff stepped out from the bushes and stood in the moonlight, a straight, tall, slender figure. Clay moved down the walk and joined him. Shoulder to shoulder they passed out of the garden into the road.

Clay knew the sheriff was as warily alert as he, was watching him as they left the house behind them. Cole would judge his enemy by himself, and Clay knew beyond question that the killer would strike without warning. The sheriff was on the right, the position of advantage. The younger man, anxious to get him out of hearing of Janice, had not hesitated to concede this. If his foe had asked him to surrender his guns he would have done that, too, in order to postpone the issue.

For the first time in his life Clay felt a curious sympathy for the man. The sheriff loved her, and he had lost. The man was evil, but there must be some alloy of good in him. He had come here driven by his fears for Janice.

"The doctor thinks she is better," young Ballard told him, yielding to the strangest impulse he had ever known.

Cole did not answer. All his thoughts and energies

were absorbed by the crisis at hand, but they were fusing not into sure and deadly efficiency but into that paralyzing fear which of late had been riding him. The man had become a victim of his nerves. He wanted to scream out to his enemy to begin. He wanted to drag out his six-shooter, but some palsy held his hand. This man was his Nemesis. It was written in the books. Why struggle against fate?

A young man, the fortune teller had said, a man strong and unafraid, one whom he had done a great wrong. Whatever Cole did would be of no avail. The man would defeat him, once and again, and in the end would destroy him. The sheriff recalled that he had tossed the woman three silver dollars and gone out of her place smiling at the prophecy. He did not smile now. What she had said was lead on his spirits, weighting him down with foreboding.

He heard young Clay Ballard's voice, clear and incisive as a bell.

"You're under arrest, Cole. For robbing the bank." Then sharply: "Keep yore hands down!"

Clay had not drawn a revolver, but his fingers hovered close to the hilt of one. The sheriff, no boaster, had once told a friend that he could draw and fire quicker than any man he had ever met. He had believed it to be true then. He still thought so. But will and muscles would not now coördinate in the sweeping gesture that in a fraction of a second would eventuate in roaring guns.

"What do you mean—robbing the bank?" Cole asked hoarsely, his beady eyes on Clay.

He was playing for delay, while he tried to whip his flagging courage to the fighting point. Soon now, he told himself, he would draw. It would be all over in a flash. He could get away with it as he had done before. In another second—or two, maybe.

"The Cattlemen's Bank. We've got yore letter to Chris Hard."

"I never wrote him a letter."

"You're a liar, Cole. Don't move or I'll drill you." Clay's revolver was in the open now. Under the hypnotism of his eye the sheriff had quailed at the decisive moment. The young man stepped behind the other, the rim of his revolver barrel pressing against the small of Cole's back. "Keep still. That's the idea. Now the other."

Clay had slid a .44 from the scabbard hanging to the sheriff's belt, another from a strap device under his armpit. He flung the weapons into the brush by the roadside.

"You can't pull this stuff on me," Cole protested. "I can't be arrested without a warrant."

"There's one in my pocket. You can see it after you're in jail. We'll drift down town. Move along."

The throat of Cole was dry as a lime deposit. Even now he could not believe that the man was not going to kill him. How had he come to let himself get into such a

hole? There had been no other purpose in his mind but to kill Ballard. Every second he had been telling himself he was just about to draw his .44 and shoot. Yet without any resistance he had let the marshal cover and disarm him. He had not been able to bring himself to a challenge for supremacy. Why? What enfeebling influence had unnerved him? Never before in his hectic lifetime had he let anyone take his weapons from him.

It was too late for battle now. The sheriff cursed himself for the weakness that had paralyzed his will. Something had gone out of him, the steel that had made him one so greatly feared. But he could not creep down Main Street, driven at the point of a gun by the man he hated. Anything but that humiliation. Death first.

"I'm not going," he said in a hoarse voice he did not know for his own. "I'm sheriff of this county. You can't arrest me."

"I can't, but I have. Suit yourself, Cole. You'll go, dead or alive."

"Kill me right here, then. That's what you aim to do, anyhow."

"I'm going to take you to jail, one way or the other."

In this man's bleak face and harsh voice Cole found no hope. Once more he gave way.

"Not down Main Street," he begged. "Put up your gun and I'll go along with you."

Voices drifted to them. Presently they saw the figures of approaching men. There were two of them, the cow-

boy nicknamed Freckles and fat Jimmie May. They stopped to take in with astonishment the surprising sight they saw.

"I'll be teetotally dummed," Jimmie May exclaimed.

"He took advantage of me," Cole broke out bitterly. "Begged me not to shoot him for fear of disturbing Mrs. Gregg, then covered me while I wasn't looking."

"What you doing with the sheriff, young fellow?" asked Freckles.

"Taking him to the lock-up. For conspiring to rob the Cattlemen's Bank."

"Rob it! Why, he bumped off two of the holdups."

"Killed his accomplices when they weren't expectin' it. You'll get the facts later."

"It's a lie!" Cole cried. "Not a word of truth in it!"

"You can tell that to the judge." Clay jumped the revolver in his hand a few inches closer to his prisoner. "Move on, Cole."

The hotel keeper and the cowboy watched them go down the street.

"Did you ever see the beat of that?" murmured Jimmie May. "Say, let's drift back to the Silver Palace an' spill the news to the boys."

Inside of an hour nearly everybody in Bonanza knew that Clay Ballard had arrested Cole and taken him to jail.

CHAPTER XXXII

In Ambush

COLE did not stay long under lock and key. Before the hour was up men of property, mostly gamblers and saloon keepers, were offering to go on his bond for any reasonable amount. But the experience was a humiliating one. The sheriff had to explain over and over again, for the sake of his reputation, how he came to let himself be arrested by Clay Ballard.

"He begged like a cur for his life," Cole explained bitterly. "Told me Mrs. Gregg had just fallen asleep and for me not to shoot please. I knew it was an excuse, but he had said the one word that stopped me. So I shoved my .44 back into the holster. That's where I was wrong, for I always knew he was a yellow coyote. He covered me right then. Well, I had my chance, boys. I was sure I could beat him to it even then, though he had his six-shooter out. But it might be true what he said about Mrs. Gregg. Anyhow, shooting would be liable to disturb her. I couldn't risk that. What was I to do? It was one thing or the other—kill him or give him my guns. I gave him my guns. First time in my life I ever let a man disarm me."

"Too bad," sympathized one of the audience, his tongue in his cheek.

"I'm no fool. I knew he meant to kill me soon as he got me far enough from the house so that there would be no chance of anybody seeing him. But what could I do—with Mrs. Gregg's window hardly thirty feet from us? Nothing else I could do but let the hellhound have his opportunity to murder me. Jimmie May and Freckles saved my life. They showed up too soon for him. Well, it's a showdown now. I'll get him or he'll get me."

That was his story. He told it so often during the next few hours that he became letter perfect. Bonanza did not accept it without reservations. The affair was gossiped about from every angle.

Sitting on a keg of nails at Farrell's Emporium, old Caleb McCoy's high cackling voice took the floor from other talkers. "Don't believe a word of it—not a word. Jas Cole claims he's a red-eyed outlaw that ain't ever been curried. Well, Clay Ballard is the white-haired lad that can rope an' ride him, sick as Clay is with two wounds in his body. Fact is, he made Cole climb a tree an' there ain't any other way to it."

"But Ballard admits he asked him not to fire when he first off saw Cole," Jimmie May suggested, easing himself into an armchair.

"Maybe so. Dad burn it, why wouldn't he, with Mrs. Gregg just fallen asleep ten-twelve yards away? That don't cut any ice. What I'm tellin' you is that Clay has

got the Injun sign on him. You can't get that boy to brag on himself, but I'm tellin' you that sure as hell's hot he'll take high, low, jack, an' the game every time him an' Cole meet up."

"If he gets an even break," Bob Field added.

"Yep," the wrinkled old-timer shrilled. "An' that's just what he won't get if he ain't doggoned careful. Now Cole's in a jackpot y'betcha he'll stack the cards plenty if he can."

The lookout at the Silver Palace had a word to say in defense of his employer. "Hmp! You'd think to hear you lads talk that this young Ballard was sproutin' wings. What the sheriff complains of is that he wasn't a square shooter. An' I believe it. You can't tell me that any man alive can talk the guns off'n Jas Cole without trouble for him instant an' sudden. This thing ain't finished yet. I'll lay a little bet that when the smoke clears away you'll find this pilgrim Ballard was duck soup for Jas."

"Take you," the old buffalo hunter shouted. "Betcha dollar—two dollars."

The gambler looked at him with cool insolence. "I never bet chicken feed. Make it fifty."

"Done," drawled Field. "Or say a hundred. On one condition. That it's an even break."

"No strings to my bets, Bob," the gambler told him. "These fellows are out to get each other. I'm interested in results, not in who gets the breaks."

His attitude reflected that of his employer. Cole had made up his mind to kill at the first chance, without risk to himself, the man who had humiliated him and wrecked his life. The sure way to do this was to lie in ambush and to shoot down the marshal when he was not expecting attack.

Cole kept off the streets to avoid a chance meeting. He stayed away from the Silver Palace. All day he sat in an upstairs bedroom of a hotel kept by one of his cronies, a room with a bay window fronting on Main Street. It was screened, so that he could not be seen from outside. He waited there, rifle in hand, for his enemy to appear.

As he sat there, or paced the floor impatiently, all the fury of his anger, of his outraged pride, boiled up in him till he felt physically sick. The whole town was talking about him, whispering the secrets of his life he had thought so well hidden. His toadies had carried it all to him: he had killed Marigold's father and bullied her mother into the grave; he had hired Cash Schmitt to murder Curtis Ballard; he had instigated the robbery of the Cattlemen's Bank and betrayed two of his accomplices to their deaths; he had destroyed Schmitt to keep the man from testifying against him. These stories and a score of others were being passed from one to another, and not one of them would have come to life but for the man whom he was waiting to shoot down. Cole knew that with the feeling of the town so

strongly set against him it would be a risk to kill Ballard from ambush, but it would be much less a risk than to let the man live to weave this web that was entangling him.

Dusk was falling when he caught sight of his enemy. Ballard and Field were coming down the street together. They stopped for a word with old McCoy. The three of them stood in front of one of the water barrels that lined the street at intervals as a protection against fire. Cole drew a bead on his man, then slowly lowered the rifle. McCoy was standing back of Ballard. He could not afford to run the risk of killing him, too.

The group shifted. Now Bob Field was in front of Ballard. Another man had joined them. Cole burned with a fever of impatience. Was he going to lose the chance he had waited for all day?

Neither McCoy nor Field were friends of Cole. They were in the camp of the enemy. But times had changed for the sheriff. He had become unpopular. The feeling against him had found voice. If he made a mistake, if he killed the wrong man wantonly or casually, those who had long hated him and been intimidated by his reputation would see to it that he never got a chance to explain away his unfortunate marksmanship.

Not for an instant did his eyes leave the strong straight figure of Ballard. It had always been characteristic of him that he grew cold and steady, filled with a sense of certainty, when the blood lust to kill swept

over him. Now he knew his hands were trembling with excitement. The emotion of hatred was too potent in him. It overpowered his poise.

There was a movement of the group toward the Cowboys' Home. The man who had just joined the party led the way through the swing door. McCoy followed. Ballard was at the old man's heels.

Swiftly Cole raised his rifle, took aim, and fired. Ballard pitched forward upon the water barrel, arms outflung, body sagging. The sheriff fired again. Field leaped toward Ballard and dragged the body behind the water barrel.

Cole's excitement passed away. His nervousness vanished. He was once more the cold, ruthless, killing machine that had cowed for years the worst gunmen of the West. He must make sure the job was done.

He dropped the rifle on the bed and dragged out a .44. He flung himself out of the room and went down the stairs two at a time. As he came into the street he saw men converging toward the Cowboys' Home from all directions.

The sheriff moved with a long loping stride that was neither a run nor a walk. He saw Ben Lyons, Field, McCoy, a dozen others that he knew, saw them as pieces of moving furniture in the scene. He was aware that a girl, light as an antelope, ran past him and flung herself upon the limp stricken body. Automatically, he heard the little wail that came out of her throat

as she went down to protect the victim. All this on the surface of his mind; more deeply, he was obsessed by his intention to make sure the thing he had done.

Field spoke, deep blue blazing through narrowed lids, "Keep back, or I'll get you sure." The cowboy's revolver was out, close to his ribs, pointed at Cole. He was crouched in front of the huddled figure. Only the gathering crowd prevented him from firing at the killer. A duel here would probably mean the injury or death of some innocent party.

The black beady eyes of the sheriff poured hate. "Lemme at him. Outa the way, fellow. He's mine."

Marigold lay above the prone body, covering it with her own. The head was pressed against her bosom, held there tightly by folded arms. She turned fear-filled eyes on the distorted face of her stepfather.

"No—no—no!" she cried.

McCoy had no gun, but he, too, barred the way. Ben Lyons was at Cole's elbow, Joe de Castro drawing near.

The red madness of the murder lust cleared from the mind of Cole. He heard the voice of the superintendent of the Three Nuggets coming out of a mist.

"You've killed him, Cole. That's enough. Better give Joe your six-shooter."

Cole spoke, breathing hard, as though he had been running, "I had to do it. I call you all to witness. Ever since I knew him he's been running on me, lying about me, trying to kill me. It's self-defense, gentlemen."

The mining man had him by the arm now. "All right, Cole. No need to discuss that here. You'd better go."

"It had to be him or me, one," the sheriff said, pushing the revolver back into its holster. "He's been asking for it right along. I never was so patient with a man."

He backed away, warily, black eyes stabbing at one and another of these men grouped around him. There were those among them who would kill him if they dared. There were others who wished him no good. Lyons was no fighter, but Cole knew the superintendent was against him. He doubted his own deputy De Castro. Not once did he turn his gaze from them as he crossed the street, not even when his heel found the sidewak, not even when his back touched the wall of the Silver Palace and he edged along it to the door through which he vanished.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Clay Wipes the Dishes

THEY sent for Dr. Hayes and meanwhile carried the body to the house by the river. McCoy had insisted on that.

"I don't reckon he's got a dead man's chance, even if there's a flicker of life in him now," the old hunter said. "The damned sidewinder took care of that. But, anyways, Marigold an' me will take care of him. Wild as he was, I've seen lots worse than Mitch Ballard."

"Cole mistook him for Clay, don't you reckon?" Field replied. "Better let it ride at that. My notion is that Clay will go gunnin' right off. No use lettin' Cole know he got the wrong man."

"That's so. We can't keep it quiet ong, but maybe we can long enough."

There was, to use McCoy's expression, still a flicker of life in Mitchell Ballard's body. Dr. Hayes, speaking to Clay and Marigold an hour or two later, made no promises.

"I can't tell you a thing yet beyond what I've already said. If he were a city man he would not live, but you outdoor Westerners have established an immunity to bullets. Maybe not just that, but I've noticed a cowboy

has to be very dead or he'll defy all precedent and get well. Don't expect too much. That's the best I can say."

Clay heard the particulars of the affair from at least four eyewitnesses.

"I dunno whether Mitch will make the riffle or not," Field told him. "But if he does he's got Miss Marigold to thank for it. She got between him an' Cole so he couldn't get another shot at yore brother. Came flyin' up the street past Cole, she did, an' flung herself on Mitch's body. He couldn't shoot without a risk of hitting her."

"I've heard she wasn't the only one that protected Mitch. You were there yore own self, Bob. I'll not forget that."

"You don't owe me a thing, Clay. I'd liked to of got that buzzard right then. Mind, I don't claim to be any Bill Hickok with a gun. I'm sure no top hand like Cole, but I'd certainly liked to have tried my luck if there hadn't been such a crowd around. I've cooled down since, an' I ain't so anxious to bump into him when he's on the shoot. My notion is that a necktie party would be about right for him. Why waste any more perfectly good citizens on him? That idea is one that could be talked up with profit to all concerned—except Mr. Cole. Where does he get the right to sit back of a screened window an' murder men he don't like? Time this community wiped him out, I say."

It was a measure of the change in sentiment that Mrs. Harden, who usually represented conventional opinion, offered herself as chief nurse for the wounded man. In a frontier town like Bonanza, where there was no hospital and where there were no professional nurses, neighbors were accustomed to volunteer their services in emergencies. Now the wife of the judge took charge of the case, under the orders of Dr. Hayes, and Marigold was one of her relief assistants.

Marigold could see that the social ban against her was being lifted. Mrs. Harden made no apologies for the past, but she showed both kindness and consideration. A few weeks ago this would have warmed the girl's heart, but now it did not seem to matter much. Her mind was preoccupied with more important concerns.

Clay went into the kitchen where Marigold was washing dishes the second day after the shooting of Mitchell. He reached for a towel and began to wipe glasses.

"You mustn't do that. It's not a man's work," she told him.

"Is it a man's work to sit around an' let a girl cook his meals for him an' do up the dishes an' help nurse his sick brother?" he asked.

"You're helping to nurse him, too," she said. "I—I—— What do you think about him?"

"I'll tell you what Bob Field told me, that if he gets

well it is because you saved him from Cole when he came rampin' up all set to kill."

The color poured into her face. It was still easy to put her in the wrong. Would people think she was a bold, impudent hussy because of what she had done? Was that what she had been? Given the same circumstances, would any nice girl, properly brought up, have flung herself with such abandon upon the body of a young man, even to save his life? She was not sorry for what she had done, but she hated to think of having done it. Moreover, there was something else—something Clay Ballard must never know. She had thought the wounded man was he.

"I—didn't think," she said in an agony of embarrassment. "I'm such an—impulsive goose. I didn't mean anything——"

"It's the gamest thing I ever heard of a girl doing," Clay said. "You've been kind to me and kind to him. You protected me an' took me in an' fed me. Now you've done even more for him, knowin' who he was."

Her heart lifted at his words. "If you mean about the —bank business——"

He nodded. "Yes, he held you up at the point of a gun. He is an outlaw. Yet you do all this for him."

"But he isn't an outlaw—really. He's wild—an' reckless—but he's good. I know he is. He has a good face. I think of him—an' then I think of Jasper Cole. An' I know that a man may do bad things without being bad.

He's what he is. Jasper Cole is bad, because his heart is bad. But your brother—I'd trust him anywhere."

"In a way, yes; in another way, no." Clay held up to the light the glass he was drying and looked at it thoughtfully without really seeing it. "I've always thought, if the right influences surrounded him——"

"Yes," she agreed eagerly. "We've talked together—some. Before he got hurt. He's kind of a boy. You must look after him—when he gets better. He's so fond of you."

"Hmp! I can't do a thing with him. I wish——"

Clay left suspended in air his wish. What was the use of telling this young girl that he wished Mitchell would fall in love with and marry a good woman? Wishes did not brand any cattle. Anyhow, it was no concern of hers.

"Yes?" she asked.

He did not answer her question, but took a new tack. "If—if he makes the grade, he'll still be in a peck of trouble. He had no business going down town an' getting mixed up in this rumpus. Someone must have recognized him. It's bound to come out about his share in the bank robbery. He'll be arrested—and probably sent over the road again. I don't see any way out for him."

"He's so reckless—always taking chances. But you can't blame him for that. You're that way your own self," she added accusingly.

"I don't think I am," he defended. "I never went

lookin' for trouble in my life. I'm naturally very quiet and peaceable."

"Do you call it peaceable to come here and stir up Jasper Cole the way you've done? If you're so gentle, why did you have to get yourself appointed marshal? It's easy enough to *say* you're this and that," she scoffed.

"Cole is responsible for this, not I," he said grimly.

The steely, almost savage, look in his eyes troubled her. What was in his mind now? What did he mean to do? It was characteristic of him, in contrast to his brother, that he had not rushed up town and forced an issue with the sheriff as soon as he learned of the attack on Mitchell. But she knew he did not intend to sit down and take it. He had thought out some plan of action. Perhaps he was waiting to see whether Mitchell would die.

Her hand lifted from the dish pan in a little gesture of despair. "That man! He acts like he thought he was Satan. Why doesn't the law get him? How can he go around doing such dreadful things an' not have to suffer for it? He just kills an' kills. You'd think some time——"

The muscles stood out in his lean clamped jaws. He said nothing, but she had never seen anyone speak more eloquently. There are times when silence is more forceful than words. He looked as implacable as fate.

She hurried on, anxious that he would not misinterpret

her words. "I don't mean you. It's not for you to do anything about it. But it's just one outrage after another. First you an' Mrs. Gregg, then this man Schmitt, an' now your brother. He ought to be trapped like a wolf and put out of the way." Marigold's vibrant young voice lifted to a sudden flame of heat.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The Avengers

THERE is nothing logical in public sentiment. It is as capricious as the fugitive desires of a baby. For years Cole had been a tolerated, almost a privileged, killer. He had never been one to win personal attachment, but many people in Bonanza had been proud of the notoriety he brought the place. In a way, he had been an asset to the town. Because he was sheriff bad men rather sidestepped it.

Now, of a sudden, Bonanza had had enough of him. It wanted to get rid of its killer. The fatalities from his roaring guns shocked and angered it. The ugly word murder began to be used. It was whispered more frequently because Clay Ballard had challenged the supremacy of the sheriff, had reduced him from a heroic tradition to something that resembled a cornered wild beast with fear and fury in its eyes.

Caleb McCoy found in this changed attitude of the town an opportunity for his bitter hatred. Secretly he rallied the enemies of the sheriff to a fighting unit. Through them he began to propagate the whisper that Cole ought to be put out of the way before he worked

himself into another killing orgy. He was careful not to approach such leading citizens as Manderson, Lyons, and Judge Harden, but to confine his suggestions to more excitable men, the miners and the cowboys who filled the saloons and the dance halls.

Mob psychology cannot be forecast in advance because it is the product of too many diverse minds. Cole had given himself up after the shooting of Mitchell Ballard and had been released on his own recognizance. The fact that he was free stimulated resentment against him. He did not move about the streets. He was rarely seen, though once a day he continued to visit the Silver Palace by the back door and at an hour when the place was empty. The receipts were very low, for the gambling house had become unpopular. Cole considered the wisdom of selling it. It was time he left this part of the country. One of his men brought him disturbing news. There was some wild talk of lynching him. He pretended to dismiss the idea as preposterous. None the less, he was troubled by it.

Yes, he had better get out as soon as he could wind up his affairs. He would slip quietly away to parts unknown. His foes were too strong for him, and they had the law with them. No use bucking the game when his luck had turned. This lynch law talk was tommyrot, of course. He had done nothing except shoot down the man who was trying to get him. Still, all the cards were turning against him these days. It might be a good

thing to go down to Denver and stay there while he was negotiating the deal for the Silver Palace. This was Saturday night. Why not take the 9:10 train?

He wrote a note to the manager of his gaming house and asked him to send at once by bearer all the spare cash in the place. This he sent by one of his faithful jackals. He was at his house, sitting in a room behind drawn curtains. While he waited he paced the floor.

A voice called him by name. He recognized it as that of one of the frequenters of the Silver Palace, a man who had always been anxious to cultivate his good will.

"What you want, Tilton?" he shouted.

"Want to tell you something important. Lemme in, Sheriff."

"You alone?"

"Y'betcha! I heard some talk you'd ought to know about."

Cole opened the door. "What is it?" he asked.

Before he could grasp the situation, before he could move, hands reached out and seized him. He had no chance to draw a weapon or to struggle. In a moment he was overpowered. Men surrounded him, dozens of them. They took his revolvers from him.

His heart seemed to drop as though weighted with ice.

"W-what does this mean?" he quavered.

They did not answer his question. He was pushed down the steps, into the street, and along it to an alley. This led to the creek. The crowd swelled as though by

magic. The newcomers took no active part in the proceedings, but there was no evidence that they disapproved. They followed at a little distance to a cottonwood beneath which the leaders stopped.

"Gentlemen, don't do this," the prisoner pleaded. "You're making a mistake. I'm your friend, as I've always been. I'll explain everything."

Caleb McCoy thrust his wrinkled face forward. "You've done all the explainin' an' all the murderin' you'll ever do, Jas Cole. You're at the end of yore rope right damn now."

"Boys, you must be crazy," Cole said, trying to crush down the terror rising within him. "I'm your sheriff. And your neighbor. You had confidence in me, and your votes elected me. For God's sake, don't hang me without giving me a show for my life."

"What show did you give Curt Ballard—or his son? What show did Chris Hard get from you after you invited him here to rob the bank?" asked Bob Field.

"Or Mrs. Gregg?" another wanted to know.

The names of his victims, a dozen of them, were hurled at him by the avengers. He quailed at the storm he had aroused. There was no hope for him. He realized that and tried to summon his courage to die game. The Adam's apple in his throat jerked up and down. His white face twitched. He could not suppress the moan of despair that welled out of him.

Field had in his hand a coiled rope. His eyes measured

the distance to the nearest limb of the cottonwood and the loop of the lariat sailed gracefully up and over it. Someone dropped the loop over Cole's head.

"I've always been your friend, Bob," the sheriff said to Field. He had to moisten his lips to articulate the words.

"You've never been any man's friend," the cowboy answered. "Understand, Cole. We're not doing this because we like to. I'd prefer to fade away an' let the other boys do it. But you've gone too far. You're bucked out. It's not safe to let you live. Any one of us might come next. You're a menace to this community. So you've got to die. Buck up an' go through with it game."

There was a swirl in the outskirts of the crowd, a murmur of excited voices. Field turned his head in that direction. Someone was plowing his way through.

"Don't start anything back there," the cowboy ordered.

A man burst into the little open space back of the group underneath the cottonwood.

"So it's you," Field said.

"What you think you're doing?" Clay Ballard demanded.

"We're hangin' Jas Cole, since you want to know."

"An' I wish we'd done it a week ago," McCoy added venemously. "It's been comin' to him a doggone long time."

Cole's amazed eyes stared at the marshal. Less than

three days ago he had shot down this man and left him for as good as dead. What miracle had brought him here alive and apparently well? He wasted no time seeking the answer.

"Save me," he groveled.

Clay did not pay the least attention to him.

"We'll talk this hangin' over, boys," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXV

Dr. Hayes Writes a Letter

DR. HAYES sat in Janice Gregg's parlor, at her desk, and wrote a letter on the fine stationery she used. He was writing to his twin sister. Between them was a very close bond. She was an understanding woman and he had always told her about the things in his life that were vital.

Janice was out of danger and improving very rapidly. Her splendid physique, the abounding health that had animated her, were the factors that had turned the scale in her favor. There was no reason why he should linger in the house after his evening call was made, no reason except the urgent one that he longed in every fiber to be close to her. Rebecca had discovered his secret. She was a partisan of his, hoped he would win her darling and knew he would not. It was her custom every evening to come waddling in with an announcement.

"I'm fixin' up a li'l' supper for you, Doctah. Sit down an' rest yo' weary bones till I get it ready."

While he waited to-night he wrote his letter.

. . . You will say I am in love—and I am. There it is in so many words. This will trouble and disturb you, my dear, for your mind will jump to what you will think the damning admission I made when I first met her—that she has led a checkered life, given herself to various lovers, followed wild and perilous paths. That is true, I suppose.

It is true, perhaps, and I condone it. To know her makes me challenge the standards we have set up. Oh, I concede their validity as safeguards to society. But here is a woman—kind, generous, brave, of perfect sincerity, one who has never harmed anyone but herself. Essentially a good woman if there was ever one. You will think me besotted to say so, but she is one of the very few great ladies I have ever met. She would sit in splendor on a throne and make such a queen as the world has not seen in a hundred years. As you read this you are smiling, not happily, but I dare to say, my dear, that I who know her see with a truer vision than you.

Put your mind at rest. I would marry her to-night if I could. But there is not the least chance for me. Her heart is engaged, to a fine bronzed young Hermes who walks through desperate danger with eyes unafraid. If I told her what I feel she would smile at me, a kind and tender smile, and would tell me the truth quite simply.

If you could see her you would understand. She was born to be loved by many men, and if she has given herself to a few it has always been royally. Through her I realize why a thousand ships set sail for Helen of Troy. I never saw anyone like her—a beautiful creature, a thoroughbred. Her body is a model of perfection, and she carries it as a young Greek goddess might have done in the morning of the world. And her face is lovely as one of Del Sarto's women. It is not an innocent childish face, but one full of lights and shadows, with such deep fine eyes that know the world's tragedy.

I must close. The young Hermes with the blue clear eyes has arrived. My dream is ended.

"How is she, Doctor?" asked Clay.

"She couldn't be doing better. I think she would like to see you."

Hayes signed and sealed the letter. He went into the invalid's room and presently returned.

"All right, Ballard," he said.

Clay walked into the room, knelt beside the bed, put his arms around Janice, and looked into the luminous eyes.

"I told you I would get well," she said, her tender smile mocking him.

"For me, you said," he corrected.

A faint color beat into the pure white of her cheeks. "Is it to be that way?" she murmured. "Do you want me, my dear, knowing all I am and have been?"

"More than anything on earth," he said, his low voice vibrant with feeling. "If I don't get you, nothing matters."

She put her soft white hands against his brown cheeks and held them tightly. "Dear boy! Dear boy!"

Ten minutes later Dr. Hayes came into the room. "Someone to see you, Ballard," he said.

Clay looked down at Janice, his eyes glad, proud with victory. "It'll be a thousand years till I see you again," he told her.

She laughed happily. "Isn't that a sweet thing to say, Doctor? Can't you see why—a woman might love him?"

"I can understand easier how a man might love you," he said.

Janice gave him her adorable smile. "Oh, go along with you, Doctor. You've kissed the blarney stone."

Joe de Castro was in the parlor. He was standing and he had not removed his hat.

"They're lynching Cole," he said abruptly.

Clay did not ask any questions. He seized his hat and led the way out of the house. While they were hurrying to the scene of action De Castro could give him the particulars.

CHAPTER XXXVI

"There Isn't Going to Be Any Hangin'"

FIELD looked at Clay, sizing up what might be in his mind. "Talkin' won't get us anywhere," he said quietly. "Business first. You can talk it over afterward all you've a mind to."

"I'm marshal of this town," Clay reminded him.

"So you are," the cowboy drawled. "An' right now we're judge, jury, an' hangman."

"Y'betcha!" McCoy chirped up. "What's eatin' you, Clay? Hasn't this wolf done you enough dirt yet? You want him to go on till he's bumped off all yore friends an' you, too? What's the idea of you buttin' in an' buyin' chips in a game where you're not invited?"

"I'm marshal, boys," Clay reiterated doggedly. "There isn't going to be any hangin'—not now."

"That so?" Field asked with obvious sarcasm. "You bring the U. S. army with you, Clay?"

"I brought the law."

Someone laughed harshly. "Why, it's here already. We got one sheriff in our midst. Ain't he law enough?"

Joe de Castro had pushed through the outer circle of the crowd to the group below the cottonwood. "Ballard is right, boys. Give Cole a square deal. Let the law take care of him."

The old buffalo hunter turned on him fiercely. "What kind of a square deal did he give my daughter's husband an' my daughter? Or Curt Ballard? Or Mitch, for that matter. Yes, or a dozen other pore fellows? Don't talk about square deals when you mention this fellow. He wouldn't get yore meanin'."

"Boys, I can explain everything," Cole said hoarsely. "Give me time. Give me a chance. Don't go on with this, for God's sake."

"I don't get what's in yore mind, Mr. Ballard," Mike Flannigan said with a puzzled frown. "You want this fellow put outa the way an' we're accommodatin' you. By yore own way of it he had yore father murdered. He tried to rob the bank an' then betrayed his pardners. He turned loose Cash Schmitt to shoot Mrs. Gregg. An' now he's done bushwhacked yore brother, mistaking him for you. I'd think you'd be all caught up on him. Where does he get his pull with you? By gorry, if there's one man ought to hate him I'd say it was you."

The lean muscles in Clay's face went taut. Bitter eyes, hard as steel, looked at the bartender. "Have I said I didn't hate him?"

"You're showing it a mighty funny way if you do," a man in miner's clothes cut in. "Cole has been trying to

kill you ever since you first met. If I was in the same drift as you I'd say good riddance."

"Same here," agreed McCoy. "If I was Clay I sure wouldn't make no holler because we're stringin' him up. Dad burn it, young fellow, what do you want for a nickel? This Bitter Creek lead pumper has been sudden death with a gun long enough. Say we're a bunch of chuckle-headed rabbits an' leave him go. What then? Give him a chance an' he'll sure fix it so you go to sleep in smoke."

"Maybe so," Clay agreed. "That's not the point. I'm marshal here. I've sworn to uphold the law. I aim to do it."

His gaze swept the circle. There was no doubt in his face. He was declaring an intention, not begging them to give up what was in their minds. They could not get away from his strength—audacious, patient, and full of certainty.

"What do you aim to do with him?" someone asked.

"To see him hanged by the law for his crimes," Clay answered, imprisoned fire leaping from his eyes.

The chalk-faced man with the rope around his neck spoke again in a dry, husky quaver. "I can explain everything, gentlemen. I'm not guilty."

Flannigan took the floor, ignoring Cole. "Like Ballard says, it was his father an' brother were shot. If he's satisfied——"

"Not on yore tintype," McCoy interrupted angrily.

"I've got a bill my own self against this mangy wolf Cole, an' I allow to have it settled right immediate. If Clay Ballard don't want to see him strung up, why, there's no law preventin' him from driftin' off an' takin' a *pasear* all by himself. He's got no pressin' invite to stay here. Not none."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Field said. "How about that, marshal? You've said yore little piece an' done yore duty. We're here for business, a quite considerable number of citizens. It ain't a debatin' society. All the arguing has been done already. My advice is for you to light out kinda inconspicuous an' quit disturbing a peaceful gathering of gents congregated for the public good."

"Hooray, Bob! Field for congress," De Castro applauded derisively.

"I'm staying here," Clay said.

"Suit yoreself," Field answered. "Take a back seat, please, an' don't interrupt the performers."

"He's my prisoner. I'm arrestin' him now."

"That so?" the cowboy flung back at the officer. "No objections, Ballard, when we're through with him. In twenty minutes, say, you can arrest him all you've a mind to. That right, gents?"

A chorus of shouts approved the young man's flippancy.

"I've already arrested him. He's my prisoner—now." The eyes of the marshal were like half-scabbarded steel

—hard and chill and inflexible. He had shifted his position and stood beside Cole, his back to the tree. While he had not drawn a revolver, the fingers of his right hand rested on the butt of a Colt .45 hanging at his hip.

"Talk sense, young fellow," McCoy shrilled. "Just because you've gone loco we don't have to change our program. I reckon you're overestimatin' the importance of yore job. A marshal ain't so much."

"There's not going to be any hangin'," Clay said quietly.

"Who'll prevent it?" someone in the rear called out. "Any buzzard head that tries will find he's bit off more 'n he can chew."

Lean flanked and graceful, steady as the rock of Gibraltar, Clay faced the balked and angry crowd. He did not answer the question that had been fired at him. Words are weak weapons at the ultimate hour.

"No use gettin' sull, Clay," the old buffalo hunter complained peevishly. "We're friends of yours, an' actin' like friends. We're doing a job you'd ought to thank us for. Instead, you get biggity an' try to bog down the outfit. Better take yore hand off that do-funny on yore hip. It don't scare us worth a cent. Me, personal, I was takin' the hide off'n 'em before you was through with didies. My tail don't go down any when you talk 'way down deep in yore throat."

Joe de Castro had joined the marshal and was protecting the prisoner on the other side.

"What's the use of beefin'?" demanded the man in miner's clothes. "Time we got busy. I'm on the night shift."

There was a movement in the crowd, a ripple that was the preliminary to a forward rush. Clay spoke in a changed voice, one that carried a harsh ultimatum, a warning that he meant to carry through at any cost.

"Don't come closer, any of you."

That challenge rang a bell for silence. The tense stillness lasted for a long moment. All present knew that Clay Ballard had served notice that he would defend his prisoner. Men's eyes slid furtively from one to another. Each waited for another to take the lead. Most of them hoped uneasily that guns would not be drawn. For, once out, six-shooters smoke quickly in frontier towns.

Bob Field was annoyed at the turn events had taken. He liked young Ballard. They were on the same side of the fence in this Cole business, except for the marshal's absurd sense of duty. Certainly he had no intention of letting any gun play get started over the matter. If he had had any sense, he told himself, he would have grabbed and disarmed Clay when he first appeared. But he had supposed the man would be reasonable. Now it was too late.

Flannigan broke the spell with a strained laugh. "By gorry, he's called our bluff, boys. We can't kill all the peace officers in town. No necktie party to-day, I'm thinkin'. I don't know about you other four flushers,

but I've got business back of the bar at McCabe's. Better come an' wet yore throttles, gents. Adios."

The bartender's words were the signal for surrender.

"I'm with you, Mike," a man called. "I'll drink to a real man, the new marshal."

The crowd began to melt away. The leaders, shamefaced and grumbling, knew they had been defeated. One resolute man had stood between them and their prey.

McCoy, in weak fury, flung his weather-beaten hat on the ground and stamped on it. "All I got to say is the fools ain't all dead yet, not by a doggone sight. We're turnin' Cole loose an' he's got every one of us spotted. Think he won't start in on us soon as he dares? Fine business. As for you, Clay, you're crazy as a loon, an' you'll have no holler when Cole bumps you off. Which he'll do. I'm tellin' you, young fellow. Dad burn it, I'm plumb disgusted."

Bob Field tucked an arm under his. "C'mon, old-timer. Some sense in what Mike says. We'll drown our disappointment in a long glass of beer. Or two."

"Better get Cole under lock an' key, hadn't we?" De Castro said to Clay.

Ballard nodded. He took no pleasure in his victory. If he had arrived too late it would have suited him exactly.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Mitchell Gets a Sign

MARIGOLD was disturbed. It was bad enough to have been in love with one man who did not want her. That fact seemed to her a shameful and a disgraceful one. For surely no nice girl ever thought about a man who had not shown a preference for her. Now, as a proof that she was wholly abandoned, it was for another that her bosom grew warm when she looked at him.

What was the matter with her? Was she fickle? Or just plain bad? In the darkness of her own room at night, when she was curled up in bed, she had time to castigate herself for her sins. Yet somehow, in spite of her reproaches, she could not be sorry that she had given her heart to the graceless scamp whom she was nursing back to health. Indeed, at times a burst of song filled her to the exclusion of all regret.

She had gone such a little way in life. She was so unsure of herself, so dubious of the propriety of what she said and did. Why, since she must be so unmaidenly as to care for a man unsought, should her choice fall on one like Mitchell Ballard? He was a jailbird and an outlaw. His feet had followed wild and crooked trails. His

careless eyes had looked no doubt on many women. And yet some instinct told her that he was not bad. His face was reckless. It could be hard. But it was not evil. She felt sure of it by the ache in her heart when she thought he might have to go back to prison or go on the dodge with bad companions to escape that fate.

He was sitting up in bed reading when she took a custard in to him.

"I've been waiting an hour. Are you tryin' to starve me to death?" he asked.

She had not yet escaped from pretty childish ways. One of them was a trick of blushing and biting her lower lip when she was embarrassed. Had she neglected him?

The whimsical quirk at the corner of his mouth reassured her. He was joking.

Mitchell watched her as she carried the tray to his bedside, a straight, slim girl palpitant with life. She was like a California poppy, he thought, vivid and colorful. It was surprising how she had emerged from the drab, unhappy years spent with Cole to blossom into a creature so sweet and flowerlike.

"If Mrs. Harden takes better care of you I'll resign," she said with a smile.

"Don't do it," he pretended to groan. "She acts like I was all ready to kick the bucket. An' I don't ever want to see the *Pilgrim's Progress* again."

"It's a good book, an' you ought to be glad she's nice

enough to read to you. I'm gettin' real fond of Mrs. Harden."

"I like one of my other nurses better."

The long eyelashes fell to her cheeks. Was she affronted? He did not know. It was so easy to alarm her. He hurried on.

"But I hadn't ought to talk. Mrs. Harden has been good to me."

"Yes, she has," the girl chided.

"Everybody has been better to me than I'd any right to expect," he said. "On Clay's account, I reckon. Funny, how two fellows as different as Clay an' I could be sons of the same father an' mother."

She arranged the tray on his lap. "You're not so different. I never saw two brothers so much alike."

"I'm not speakin' about looks. Come to that, I'm glad we do favor each other. If Cole hadn't got me he would have got Clay, an' maybe he would have killed him. Credit one good mark for the dog with the bad name, though at that it just happened thataway. No, I'm talkin' about character. He's four-square, straight, a first-class citizen. An' what am I? No need to tell you what everybody knows. A bad egg."

"No," she protested.

"Always have been," he went on. "Wild an' uncontrolled. Some devil in me always drivin' me on to do crazy things. Even prison didn't cure me like it ought to have done. It made me hell bent, beggin' yore pardon,

to get even with the fellows who railroaded me in. I see now what a fool I've been. An' it's too late."

"Why is it too late?" she asked tremulously.

His eyes fastened hungrily on her. He could have given one reason. He gave another.

"I've got to go back to the pen, haven't I? Folks in this town will be ready to identify me as the fellow wanted for the bank holdup. You'll have to be a witness against me yore own self."

"I won't."

"Plenty of others will, I reckon. But even that don't worry me most. That poet fellow sure had the right of it when he said the saddest words are: 'It might have been.' Yes, ma'am. All my good cards are in the discard an' I'm holdin' a busted flush. Nobody to blame but me. I've got no kick coming."

For a good woman, a young and romantic one, the sinner's charm lies not in the sin itself but in the hope of influencing him to overcome it. Marigold's heart yearned for him. He would be good now, she knew he would, if he only had a chance. Her throat ached with the pity of it.

"I don't know. I can't think it will be as bad as that," she said.

He looked at the pure color of the girl with a reluctant hopelessness. It seemed to him to typify her charm. She was no bouncing round-breasted young woman, but one of shy and virginal sweetness. Not for him, he groaned

in his heart. Every instinct of honor told him he must not even try to win her. It would be an outrage against hospitality, against decency. He was already a man damaged irretrievably by his past, condemned by the future that awaited him, to walk alone. He must not take her little hand in his. The strength in him, so vitally masculine, would be not a protection but a menace to her.

Yet the imminence of that future, which would take him away from a world of living men and women to that horrible place where dead men walked, and ate, and slept behind stone walls, made the urge resistless to get from her some word of comfort to take with him into the darkness.

His eyes, at once so passionate and so tragic, alarmed the girl. She blushed as she breathed, and blamed herself for blushing. The man threw away his scruples. He must have a sign from her if he could get it. It would be at least a memory for him in the years to come.

"All my chips on the table, and nothing but a busted flush in my hand," he told her bitterly. "I'm out of the game. Not a dead man's chance. But say I wasn't. Say I hadn't flung away my right to play. What then?"

She drew back, heart aflutter, from the burning misery in his gaze. "I don't know what you mean," she murmured.

"You saved my life at the risk of yore own," he continued. "You can't do that an' act like it's of no im-

portance. It gives me a right to talk. But right or wrong I've got to speak. If I was where Clay is, with an open road ahead, an' the sun shining an' the birds singing, what would you tell me now?"

"Tell you—now?" she asked timorously, the crimson streaming through her cheeks.

He had her strong warm little hands in his now. She stood mute, the lashes fallen to her hot cheeks and hiding any telltale message of the big brown eyes. Flower-like and precious, he thought her, and knew he could not in any way justify his remorseless pressure upon her emotions.

"I'm going where I'll never see you again—to be shut up for years away from all decent folk like you. But say I wasn't. What then?"

She looked at him, dumb anguish in her eyes. It was true. As soon as he was well enough they would hurry him to trial and then to prison. They would take him out of her life, back to that place where men were put because it was not safe to let them move about unguarded, in the warm and pleasant sunshine, with good people who respected the rights of others. Already Joe de Castro had gone through the formality of arresting him. They let him stay here only because he still had to be nursed and was as yet too weak to attempt escape. He had done wrong, of course. But it was in her Bible that One yearned for the lost lamb and went out into the

storm and brought back the stray to the shelter of the fold.

With a little despairing cry she slipped down beside him to a seat on the quilt and took his head in her arms. As she held it tightly pressed against her virginal breast there was the fierceness of possession in the gesture. She would fight for her own against all the cruel world reaching to destroy him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The Last Shot

As Cole walked down the street between the marshal and Joe de Castro his shoulders sagged. He had always been conspicuous for the erectness of his carriage, for the pride that trod in his stride. His hawklike eyes had been so insolently sure of his dominance. Now all that was gone. His feet dragged with the weariness of defeat.

Jasper Cole had just come from tasting the bitterness of death. The horror of it had risen to his throat and choked all the courage out of him. He had not played the man, and he knew it. The knowledge was gall and wormwood to him.

He had lost everything in life worth having. One after another they had gone—reputation for probity and for courage, his lover, admirers, adherents, the awe and envy of his fellows, even his own confidence in himself. All gone. He stood, a convicted poltroon, in the shadow of the penitentiary, one wholly and utterly discredited.

His stock in trade was lost. He was an empty shell, with no more vitality in him than a scarecrow in a wheat field. His feet had brought him to the end of the road. It came to him, with the force of a despairing conviction,

that death would be a release. There was no other way for him.

The sooner the better! Now!

With a swift wrench he freed his arm from De Castro's grip. The force of the lunge brought his body close to Ballard. His left hand found the butt of the marshal's revolver and with one spasmodic tug he dragged it from the holster.

Clay's fingers closed on the sheriff's wrist. The two men struggled.

"Leave him to me," Clay called to De Castro above the shoulder of his enemy. He was afraid that the deputy, dragging at their prisoner, would for a moment either free the man's hand or put it into a position to fire. That was the one danger to be avoided.

Clay was more powerful than his foe. He was younger, more agile, in better physical trim. But he fought at disadvantage, for a large part of his energy had to be expended in keeping Cole's left arm straight, pointed in such a direction that if the revolver should be fired no damage would be done.

The men tossed to and fro, locked together as they swayed. Cole tried to break away. An instant would be enough, first to kill his enemy and then himself. His forearm caught under Clay's chin and strained to fling back the head that drove into his chest.

At first Clay was wholly concerned with protecting himself against the revolver that jerked wildly back and

forth. But presently, as his superior strength began to tell, he evolved a plan of campaign. He dared not fling the sheriff to the ground lest he lose control for the space of the flicker of an eye of the flailing arm which threatened destruction. On the sidewalk, close at hand, was one of the water barrels used as a protection against fire. Toward this he maneuvered the desperate man.

The deputy sheriff hovered about, eager to close with Cole. Again Clay warned him to keep back. He did not want help that might counterbalance his own efforts. Yet a dozen times Cole almost freed his arm from the fingers fastened like steel prongs to his wrist.

Clay whirled the man around and drove him back against the barrel. The sheriff struggled for a foothold, while the younger man, all his weight and force against the other's chest, pushed Cole down upon the barrel. The two lay panting, breast to breast.

Before Clay could get set the man underneath, with a mighty effort, flexed his arm. It was too late for Clay to stop this, but he was just in time to save himself. He moved the other's wrist from him, and the rim of the revolver barrel lay pressed against the temple of the sheriff. The whole shift of Cole's arm had taken only a fraction of a second.

They looked into each other's eyes, Cole glaring hate and defiance. The forefinger of his left hand bent. A bullet crashed into his brain. The revolver clattered to the ground.

Clay staggered back, amazed and shaken. He had not had the least inkling of what Cole intended to do.

"He's killed himself," the young man gasped.

Joe de Castro came forward and looked at the limp body lying across the water barrel. "Yep," he said. "Sure has."

The street was miraculously full of people. Clay had seen none of them until this moment. Where had they come from so suddenly?

"Figured it the best way out," Field said. "Knew he was done for. Tried to get Clay first, I reckon."

"Looks thataway," agreed fat Jimmie May wheezily. "Well, boys, that's sure a better way for Jas to go out than the one some of you had fixed up a while ago. Seems more fittin'. He was too prominent a citizen to hang."

"Suits me if it does him," McCoy replied. "But I'm makin' no apologies because he's dead. I've known a lot of bad characters in my time, an' barrin' Injuns he was the worst."

They carried the body of the dead killer into a store and laid it on a counter. Filled with morbid curiosity, people came in and filed past it as though the slender rigid figure held a fascination for them. The most notorious gunman of the state had handed in his checks. In death as in life Jasper Cole held the center of the stage.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Marigold's Troubles End—and Begin

MARIGOLD carried her secret and her troubles to Mrs. Gregg.

"I love him so," she pleaded, "and as soon as he is well enough they'll take him from me and put him in prison."

Janice listened gravely. It was disturbing to learn that this child had given her heart to so wild and reckless a scamp as Mitchell Ballard, one so unstable in character and already smirched in reputation. She would have wished it otherwise, but she could not refuse to help. Quite apart from Marigold's concern about him, he was the only brother of her lover. She was not interested in abstract justice. Mitchell had had his lesson. That he would go straight now she was convinced. All her quick sympathy went out to try to find a way to save him.

"I'll do what I can," Janice promised. "It's been on my mind, and I've thought of a plan that may work. But I'm sorry, dear child, you are in love with him. Are you sure it's not just a fancy?"

"I'm very, very sure. I—I can't live with him in prison. You *will* try to save him, won't you?"

"Yes, but I'd be happier trying if you hadn't just told me what you have. You are too good for him. I'm troubled at what you've said. Don't you think you'd better try to forget him? He's been a convict, dear. He may be sentenced to another term. I don't think he is bad at heart, but I know he had no right to win your love. It's not fair.'

"That doesn't matter. All I care about is that I love him and he loves me."

"That's all you care about now," the older woman said gently. "But you're thinking of to-day, and I'm thinking of to-morrow. Will this man, so lawless and so reckless, bring you happiness? How sure are you of him? If you marry him, he'll be the father of your children, Marigold. It will be in his power to wreck your life completely. He may do that, loving you all the time, because there is something in him too strong for him to overcome."

Marigold threw out her hands in a little gesture of abandon. "I'll have to take my chance of that. If I married a nice, safe, plodding man you couldn't insure me happiness, could you?"

"No, I couldn't," her friend admitted. "But some risks are too great to take. I'm afraid this is one of them."

Another case also was in her mind as she spoke. She was thinking of herself and Clay. Of late she had been strangely happy in his love, contented as she had never

been before, the restlessness of her nature dissolved in peace. But could she be sure of herself? Did people ever really change? Or was it possible that in this woman who wanted a home and children and a husband's love she had at last found herself?

Clay came into the room.

"May I tell him?" Janice asked Marigold.

The girl nodded, a deep color in her cheeks.

"She is in love with your brother. She wants to marry him," Janice told the young man.

"No—no!" he protested.

Janice observed him with a faint mocking humor. "You don't believe in marriages of that kind—where one party to it is beyond the pale and the other isn't?"

"I don't know what Mitch can have been thinking of," he said, frowning.

"He appears to have been thinking of Marigold," Janice said with a smile. "I don't blame him. Did you ever see anyone as pretty as she is nowadays?"

Marigold looked at her reproachfully. It was not difficult to embarrass her.

"Mitch is out of the runnin'. He's got no right to—to ——"

"To fall in love with a girl. Perhaps he couldn't help it."

"I know, but——"

"I've promised Marigold to help get Mitch out of his trouble," Janice said. "I have a little plan. Would you like to hear it?"

She explained what was in her mind.

Two weeks later the plan of Janice was put to the test.

Joe de Castro drove up to the bank in a buckboard, a young man sitting beside him. His passenger, who was also a prisoner, wore a long Prince Albert coat, a stiff white shirt, a black bow tie, and a soft black felt hat. He had a little mustache and sideburns. His hair was combed in the absurd fashion then in vogue among flashy youths. It was plastered low on his forehead, brushed from left to right. The man's face was pale, almost without color. From his appearance it would have been difficult to guess whether he was an itinerant preacher or a tinhorn gambler.

The officer took him into the bank. Those who had seen the bandits on the day of the robbery were present.

Joe de Castro at once put the question of the hour. "Is this the guy we want? What think, Manderson?"

A man lounged in through the side door of the bank. He was dressed exactly as the third outlaw had been the day of the holdup. The man was the town marshal.

Manderson looked at the prisoner, then looked at Clay. His eyes went back to the pale man in "store clothes."

"Can't prove it by me," he said at last. "Don't look half as much like him as our marshal does, and I'm not making any insinuations, either."

Flannigan shook his head. "I pass, Sheriff."

"Not a bit like the man," Marigold said. "I said once

that Mr. Clay Ballard isn't the man. I know he isn't, but Mr. Manderson is right when he says that he looks a lot more like him than this gentleman here."

The other witnesses refused to identify Mitchell.

"Nothin' for me to do but turn him loose," De Castro said. "Which I'm hereby doing right now."

He knew perfectly well that Janice Gregg, putting to use her stage experience, had made up Mitchell Ballard for the occasion. His illness had done something for him by removing the coat of tan from his face and leaving him thin and pallid. But the formal clothes, the mustache and sideburns, the cheap barber-shop method of hairdressing, had changed him very much more. There were others besides De Castro who had their suspicions, but it was their opinion, as it was his, that there had been trouble enough already over this matter. Directly or indirectly four men had lost their lives on account of the difficulties that had begun the day of the robbery. Three other persons had been wounded. That was enough. Bonanza was ready to put the cards into the discard and call for a new deal, as old Caleb McCoy phrased it.

So Marigold drove the buckboard back to the house by the river instead of Joe de Castro. Mitchell sat beside her in silence. His eyes watched the fluent grace of the slender young thing. He was humbled in heart, a contrite man, and though happiness flooded his being there was mingled with it a strange distress. Her friends

were right. He was not worthy. It seemed to him that God spoke through her. She was still to him the maiden mysterious, penetratingly sweet and hedged about with dear innocence. A line of Scripture sang itself in his mind. He could not remember it exactly but—God do so to him and more also if he did not do all a man could to make her happy. If it was true that he had no right to marry her it was true also that she would not have it any other way.

"I don't know," he said at last doubtfully. "I wish I did. I've been a bad lot. Clay sure laid the law down to me. Maybe——"

A strong warm little hand pressed his. "We've settled all that, you know."

He reached for the reins and drew up beneath a large cottonwood. Her shy young eyes met his, and at the touch of her surrendered lips his hesitation vanished. She was to be his mate, come weal or woe.

Presently Caleb McCoy limped down the path by the river. "Seems like you might have waited for me, honey," he complained to Marigold.

"Oh, Granddaddy, I didn't know you were comin' home," she said remorsefully. "You know you said you were going to Farrell's."

"Did I? Well, that's all right. Glad everything worked out so well for you, Mitch. One o' these days I'm gonna jack you up like a Dutch uncle for the way you been actin'. I sure am."

"Hop to it, Mr. McCoy. Anything you say goes. But I'm plumb through hellin' around. Never again."

The faded eyes of the old buffalo hunter carried to him a startling impression. There had been at sight of him a certain embarrassment in the manner of these two young people. His granddaughter's bright eyes and flushed cheeks betrayed her.

"How come you to stop here? The horses play out?" he asked suspiciously.

"We kinda stopped to talk," Mitchell explained.

"Hmp!" The old-timer scrutinized the girl. "You certainly got a good sunset in yore cheeks this evenin', honey."

Marigold's eyelashes fell to the hot cheeks. How much had he seen? And was there anything that even the angels ought not to have seen? Her innocence was disturbed by the memory of the passion with which she had given herself to her lover's embrace.

She slipped down from the buckboard, ran to her grandfather, and buried her face in his shoulder. "Can't you guess?" she whispered.

Caleb's heart sank. He was to lose her as he had lost her mother. But it was the way of life. He patted her shoulder gently.

"That's all right, honey. It's all right," his thin voice quavered.

CHAPTER XL

All the To-morrows of All the Years

CLAY and Janice were alone in her parlor. She smiled at him, the challenging, mysterious smile born of thoughts he could not fathom.

"So you're reconciled to the marriage of Mitchell and Marigold," she said.

"Does it matter whether I am or not?" he asked. "They say they mean to go on and be happy in spite of my doubts."

"But you still have doubts?"

"Haven't you? Or do you believe that marriages are made in heaven?"

"I've seen some made in the other place." She shook her head and looked down at an envelope in her hand. It was a fat square one, with many pages of note paper inside it. "People don't act as they ought to, or at least as you'd expect them to. By our records, you should marry Marigold and I should marry Mitchell."

"We'll forget the records, since none of us have finished makin' ours yet. There's only one woman in the world I ought to marry, and only one I want to. You know who that is, Janice."

She looked up from the chair where she sat at her straight brown man. A faint crimson streamed into her cheeks. She loved him as she had never loved before and never would again. He was her one chance for happiness.

"If I could be sure," she murmured.

"Of what? Is there anything in life sure?"

"That I ought to marry you, dear heart." She gave him the letter in her fingers. "Read it, Clay. Think about it. Be very, very sure before—before you make it final. Perhaps when you've read it you won't want to go on with me."

He looked at the envelope and then at her. "Is this a love letter?" he asked.

"It's the story of my life. It's the explanation of me. I've tried to tell the whole truth."

"May I smoke?" he asked.

She nodded assent. He lit a cigar.

"Do you mean that all the facts of yore life are in this letter?" he asked.

"Yes—everything."

He met with a smile her troubled eyes. "Janice, I am marrying you and not yore past. If I read this it would not make any difference to me. Why should I read it? Must I write you all about the times I've stumbled?"

"That's different," she said. "I'm a woman."

"The woman I love, the woman that loves me."

"Yes, Clay."

"That's enough. I don't want to know more."

He put the envelope to the end of his cigar. Janice watched it char and break into a little flame, watched it burn in his hand and at last fall a mass of flame into the fireplace.

"There goes our past," he said, turning eagerly to her. "Yesterday was yesterday, to-day is to-day."

She drew a long, deep breath and accepted the hands he held out to her.

"If you won't be warned," she cried, and with one lithe movement of her supple body was in his arms.

To-morrow was theirs. All the to-morrows of all the years were waiting for them.

THE END

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